

リリアとトイズ II

そして二人は旅行に行つた(下)

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リリア・シュルツ

十五歳。
ロクシーアヌク連邦(東側)首都に住む上級学校三年生。
母はアリソン、父親は亡きヴィルヘルム・シュルツ。
特技はベゼル語会話と飛行機の操縦。
本名はとても長い。



トレイズ

十六歳。
フランチェスカ女王とベネディクトの息子。
イクス王国の王子だが、諸事情により王子ではない。
メリエル王女は双子で、どちらが年上かと係争中。
正体を知らないリリアとは幼なじみ。



トラヴァス少佐

三十五歳。
ベゼル・イルトア王国連合(西側)の軍人。
大使館に勤める駐在武官で秘密情報部員。
要するにスパイ。
アリソンの現在の彼氏であり、正体は……。

Lillia Schultz: 15 years old. A third-year secondary school student who lives in the Capital District of the Roxcheanuk Confederation. Her mother is Allison, and her father is the late Wilhelm Schultz. Lillia's specialties are Bezelese and flying aeroplanes. Her full name is extremely long.

Treize: 16 years old. He is the son of Queen Francesca and Sir Benedict. Although Treize is a prince of Iks, certain circumstances prevent him from claiming royal status. He and his sister Meriel constantly argue about which one of them is the older twin. Treize and Lillia are childhood friends, but she does not know his true identity.

Allison Schultz: 35 years old. She is a captain in the Roxcheanuk Confederation Air Force. Allison currently works as a test pilot, and lives with her daughter Lillia in an apartment in the Capital District. She is still a heavy sleeper.

Major Travas: 35 years old. He is part of the Royal Army of the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa. He is a military attaché who works in the embassy, and is part of the intelligence agency—in other words, he is a spy. Major Travas is currently Allison's boyfriend, but in reality—

リリアと
トレイズ
II

そして二人は旅行に行つた(下)

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Chapter 6: Wings of Death

The seaplane was cruising over the Kurz Sea.

It had a hard streamlined fuselage, wide wings, four engines lined up atop them, and propellers drawing clear circles in the air. And much like a waterborne vessel, everything under the water line was painted black.

The engines sang a four-part harmony, leisurely and elegantly—or, to be more cynical, slowly and heavily—pushing the plane through the air.

Three men sat in the cockpit. The two sitting side-by-side were the pilot and the co-pilot, with the pilot on the left side. Sitting sideways behind them, beside the engine control panel and the radio, was the engineer. He was the one who had led the children aboard earlier.

The men were all in their forties, wearing aviator jackets over their button-up shirts with ties, with hats and headsets on their heads. Microphones were strapped around their necks.

The bearded man in the pilot's seat said over the radio to his companions, <Things are going smoothly. For now.>

The other men replied, <For now.>

<Yes, for the time being.>

The pilot glanced at the clock crammed between the instruments and muttered, <Not much longer. Soon, we'll be filthy rich.>

Somewhere above and behind the seaplane.

Four fighter planes were flying in its blind spot.

They were amphibious planes equipped with floats; the same model flown by the man who shot Mateo the previous day, and the ones that riddled Mateo's plane with bullets.

The planes flew in diagonal formation, maintaining the same speed as the seaplane as they followed.

Inside the seaplane, the children clung to the windows as the dampened roar of the engines filled the cabin. They stared outside, ever-captivated by the water below and the ripples of sunlight.

And in the very last row, Lillia slept.

Carlo, sitting across from her, twirled his hat around his finger and whispered, "Big sis is totally knocked out. Too bad."

"She's just tired. Leave her be," Treize replied. He also seemed completely uninterested in the view, keeping the curtain shut and staring a hole through the seat ahead of him, deep in thought.

Carlo turned to Treize. "I wanna ask you something."

"Yeah?"

"Are you big sis's boyfriend?"

Treize's expression stiffened. He slowly shook his head. "If she were awake to hear that, she'd yell, 'No!' and get angry."

"At me?"

"At me. Though I don't know why."



"Huh," Carlo mumbled, then asked, "Then you've never kissed, either?"

For a moment, Treize was frozen. But he quickly struggled to gather himself. "No, not yet. And I seriously hope she didn't hear that, either."

"Would she hit you?"

"She would."

"Well, I guess it's nice to be friends."

"I don't know how you came to *that* conclusion, but it certainly is nice to be friends."

"Anyway..." Carlo trailed off, his gaze turning to Lillia as his tone grew calm. "Big sis is really pretty."

"Huh? ...Oh. Yeah."

"She looks like a good person. She looks really nice and kind."

"You wouldn't want to see her when she gets angry."

"And she's got long, shiny hair. You see people with brown hair everywhere, but something's different about her. You know, when I saw her at the harbor earlier, big sis's hair was shining in the sun like silk. It was really pretty."

"Looks like somebody's in love."

Carlo's gaze turned into a glare aimed straight at Treize. "What? No!"

"You're not sounding very convincing."

"Don't make me get mad at you! Stop acting like you know everything."

"All right, all right. I'm sorry."

"Tch."

Treize apologized with a smile, and Carlo pushed his hat over his face and turned away. He turned his sights to the scenery outside.

"Can you see below from that window?" asked Treize.

"Yeah. Why?"

"Do you see land? It doesn't matter if it's far."

"Land? No. There's been nothing but water all around for a while. This is really fun. You know, I've been swimming a lot but I've never seen the lake from high up."

"That's strange..." Treize muttered, glancing at the watch on his left hand. "Something's not right."

It was already long past the landing time he had estimated for Lillia earlier.

Treize drew back the curtains and pressed his face against the glass, his sights set ahead. He could see the left wing and the support floats underneath. When he turned, he could see the sun shining brightly above.

"What...?" he gasped. Carlo looked over.

"What's wrong, big bro?"

The sunlight filtered in through the round window and shone on Treize's shocked face.

Treize scrambled to unwind his watch. He pointed the hour hand, which was pointing at the 3, toward the sun. In the northern hemisphere, the angle between the hour hand pointing at the sun and the number 12 was south.

Treize noted that south was behind him and to his left. So the plane was headed northwest. In other words, the seaplane was flying towards the center of the massive Kurz Sea—in the opposite direction from Lartika and land.

"Why didn't I figure this out earlier? ...I'm such an idiot!" Treize chastised himself. Carlo gave him a quizzical look. "What's wrong? Was the apple from before poisoned?"

"No, it's something else," Treize replied, and getting off his seat, he went over to Lillia. With his right hand he mercilessly pinched her left cheek. "Lillia, wake up!"

"Hmm? Huh...?"

When Lillia woke up to the sight of Treize pinching her, she instantly swung her right arm. Treize stopped her fist with his left hand and let go of her face.

"What the heck, Treize? You couldn't think of any other way to wake—"

"Lillia. Something's not right."

The gravity in Treize's face chased some (but not all) of the sleep from Lillia's eyes. "With you? Took you long enough to figure out."

"No, I'm talking about this seaplane."

"It's still flying nicely."

"Exactly. It's still flying. We should have landed already by this point."

"Maybe they're taking a detour. Wake me up when we get there."

"Don't fall asleep! The seaplane's headed in the opposite direction. At this rate, we're going to run out of fuel in the middle of the lake."

Lillia stared curiously and stood. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to the cockpit to ask what's happening. Let's go."

"All right." Lillia nodded.

"Hey, what's going on?" Carlo wondered, finally joining the conversation.

"We're not sure yet, but tell the others not to worry."

"Okay..."

Lillia and Treize left Carlo behind and walked down the aisle. They passed the children, who clung to the windows, and approached the door. Treize reached for the handles. Of the three, the top and the bottom handles moved. However—

"...Damn it."

The second one was locked. Treize crouched next to the door and peered into the keyhole.

"Lillia, do you by any chance have a—"

"Move."

Lillia grabbed Treize by the shoulder and pushed him aside. Then she took out a hairpin from the wallet in her pocket and broke it in half, then stuck it in the keyhole and fiddled with it with both hands.

"...Come on...just a little more..."

There was a click, and the lock came undone. Treize tested the handle and turned to Lillia. "You're good."

"Mom passed on this technique to me. Apparently now I can get into the house even if I forget my keys."

"Right..."

Quietly, Treize opened the door and slipped outside. Lillia followed him and shut the door behind her.

In the dark corridor, they turned to the front of the plane. At that moment—

“Huh?”

“What?”

Treize’s eyes met the bearded pilot’s. Both gasped in bewilderment.

The pilot stood at the door. There was a large cloth rucksack on his back. Upon closer examination, it turned out to be not a rucksack, but a parachute. It was strapped not only to his shoulders, but also around his chest and thighs.

“What’re you doing?” Treize asked.

“Heh heh heh.” The pilot laughed abashedly. Lillia, who watched from behind Treize, also froze in shock.

“Huh?”

“Sorry, kids!”

With that, the pilot heaved the door open.

“What?” “Wait—”

The moment the door opened, the corridor was filled with the howl of the wind and the roar of the engines. Lillia’s hair danced in the gale.

The pilot fixed the gaping door to the interior and pulled the parachute cord from his left side. There was something metal at the end of the cord, and he hooked it to the handle by the door.

“Bye!”

With a yell, the pilot jumped out the door. All that was left was the rope hanging out the doorway.

As Lillia and Treize stood, dumbfounded, the co-pilot emerged from the cockpit. He was also wearing a parachute. His eyes went wide for a moment when he spotted the duo, but he quickly hooked the cord to the handle with a deft hand and followed the pilot outside.

The third man soon emerged. He was the friendly engineer from before. Treize pulled his handgun from his belt pack and pointed it at the man.

“Hey, you! Freeze!”

“Huh?”

Taken completely by surprise by the presence of people outside the locked door, and the fact that one of the people was pointing a gun at him, the engineer froze with his eyes bulging. Though he had the cord in his left hand, he had yet to hook it onto the handle. In his right hand was something resembling a large telephone receiver about 30 centimeters in length.

“Whoa! Don’t shoot, young man!” the engineer cried, his voice fighting the roar of the wind. Treize stepped forward, his gun still trained on the man.

“Don’t move!”

“This is very unfriendly of you, young man! Why do you have a gun?” the engineer mocked. Treize cocked the gun.

“Get back in the cockpit!”

“And what would I do back there, eh?”

“Do I have to spell it out for you? Land this plane immediately!” Treize replied without hesitation. But the engineer snorted.

“Hah hah! I’m just an engineer. How would I fly this plane? The pilots are already gone!”

Treize ground his teeth. The engineer quickly used his right hand to affix his parachute cord to the handle. Then, as he prepared to jump—

“If you so much as twitch, I will shoot you.”

A look of deadly calm rose to Treize’s face. He looked even more menacing than before.

The engineer’s forced grin vanished. “Look...you wouldn’t open fire in here, would you? One bad ricochet, and it’d take down the plane,” he pointed out.

“That won’t happen. All I have to do is shoot you in the head. Once these bullets get into your skull, they won’t be getting out.” Treize replied nonchalantly.

“A-anyway! This plane is going to crash now that the pilots are gone. Everyone here is going to die!”

“Would you like to be the first?”

The engineer was silent.

“Why are you doing this?” Treize demanded.

“...For the money, obviously.”

“I’ll ask you about your employer later. First, put your hands in the air and turn around. Get back in the cockpit.”

“A-and if I refuse?”

“I’ll take your inheritance. I’m sure it’ll be enough to feed me for a very long time,” Treize threatened with a smile on his face. A hint of anxiety rose to the engineer’s face.

But at that moment, the world shook.

The floor seemed to sink beneath them, throwing everyone into the air. Lillia quickly grabbed the handrail. Treize reached for the wall with his left arm—his gun-arm—to support himself.

The engineer threw aside his radio and grabbed a nearby handrail.

“AAAAAARGH!”

With a shout, he pushed forward with his right hand and broke into a run. And he stumbled toward the door.

“Tch!”

The moment Treize spotted the man’s charge, he took aim—but when the target overlapped with the interior of the plane, he gave up and ran for the door. And with his left hand on the handrail inside the shaking plane, he stuck out his head into the gust outside.

In the distance was a small circle. A parachute.

Treize pulled himself back inside, armed the safety on his gun, and dropped it into his belt pack. Then he pulled the three parachute cords into the plane and shut the door. The gust stopped.

Like a car driving off-road, the seaplane continued to shake. To make matters worse, the fuselage was beginning to tilt forward. Treize climbed up the steep steps toward the cockpit.

Naturally, the cockpit at the top of the stairs was empty. Beyond the empty seats, a circular yoke—shaped much like a steering wheel—rattled unattended.

“Bastards.”

Treize ran to the pilot’s seat and firmly took hold of the yoke.

“I know I said that I’d love to try flying this thing, but seriously...”

Suppressing the turbulence as best he could, Treize slowly pulled the yoke forward.

“Please stop shaking...”

The turbulence slowly began to weaken. Eventually, the plane returned to its placid pace.

“Phew...” Treize breathed a sigh of relief. The plane was now stable.

“Hey! What’s going on here?!”

That was when he heard Lillia’s voice from behind. She climbed the steps and poked her head into the cockpit.

“Ugh...” Lillia groaned when she saw the cockpit, with no one but Treize occupying it.

She climbed all the way inside and took a seat next to him, putting a hand on his chair.

The engines were so loud that she had to shout.

“Talk about slacking off on the job. Big time,” Lillia grumbled.

Treize looked to his upper right. “If only things were that easy. There’s no one left now.”

“What’re we going to do?”

“Easy. We do something—anything.”

Lillia nodded and replied as though she were safe in another world, “Yeah. I guess you’re right.”

“Why do these instruments have to be so complicated?” Treize groaned, his eyes passing over the sprawling panel. He pointed at each one in succession, checking the functions.

“Fuel...we’ve still got about half. Altimeter...turn indicator...variometer...airspeed indicator...turn coordinator...clock...the clock’s working, at least. Heading...I knew it—we *are* headed north. Engine readouts...not every day you get to see four of those in a row. And the throttle lever is overhead—not my style, but what can you do? And...what’s this?”

Treize wrestled with the controls for some time. Several minutes passed.

“All right. I think I’ve got the hang of things,” he finally said.

“Are you sure?” Lillia asked, worried.

Treize replied in his usual tone, “All planes are the same! ...Is what I learned from the guy who taught me to fly.”

“You’re inspiring *so* much faith, Treize.”

“Anyway, we’ll slowly descend from here—”

“Are we going to keep flying?”

“I don’t know. We should head back to the village if we can. If not, we’ll descend into a water landing. This is a seaplane, and we’re on a lake. Everything we see is a potential airstrip. Can you take care of the rest, Lillia? A seaplane this size has *got* to have a large radio somewhere,” Treize said.

“You mean that thing there?”

“Huh?”

Treize turned. Behind him and to his right, in the large radio usually manned by the engineer, was an axe with a red handle. The axe that was supposed to break the windows in case of an emergency landing.

“Damn it...talk about thorough,” Treize growled.

“Oh! What about that emergency signal thing Mr. Mateo told us about?” Lillia wondered.

"The emergency radio beacon? ...I don't think we'll find one on an old model like this," Treize replied, looking around the cockpit. "...Nope," he added with a deliberate nod. Lillia frowned.

"Then what do we do?"

"We can't radio for help, but as long as we have fuel we can taxi over the water to get to the village. Like a ship," Treize said, "Lillia. The last man dropped his radio before he jumped. It should still be on the floor."

"It should be."

"Could you get it for me? If it's not broken, it'll have a range of a couple kilometers. It'll be useful for when we land and wait for a rescue crew."

"All right. It looks like things'll work out. I'll be right back." Lillia turned. But Treize stopped her.

"While you're at it, could you check on the kids?"

"Check on them...and then what?"

"If they're panicking, calm them down...and please bring Carlo here."

Lillia nodded and climbed downstairs.

About 30 seconds later, she returned with the radio in hand. Carlo followed after her.

"What's going on, big bro? Why're you the only one here?" Carlo asked. Instead of replying, Treize asked Lillia how the children were.

"They were a little scared because of the turbulence earlier, but I think they're over it now."

"That's good to hear."

Treize turned to the confused Carlo. "Actually, we have a problem. Not a big one."

"Not a big one?" Carlo shot back immediately. "As if. It's written all over your faces."

"...Well, okay. It's not *not* a big one."

"What's happening? You can tell me. I'm listening."

"All right. The people flying this seaplane all took off with parachutes."

"What? Then we're a ship without a captain? That's not good."

"Yeah. So I have to fly the plane myself. Lillia and I are going to do something about this," Treize said.

Lillia quietly waited for Carlo to react.

"Oh."

And she was shocked by his response.

"You two know how to fly a plane? I guess that's rich people for you," Carlo said nonchalantly.

"I-I guess so, but...anyway, it's no big deal. There's nothing to worry about, really," Treize said, playing along.

"So what do you need me to do? You called me up here to do stuff, right?"

"Good to see you're quick on the uptake. You can leave the flying to us, but since we're here we can't keep an eye out on the passenger cabin."

"I know that. And?"

"So go back to the cabin and take charge of the other kids. There might be turbulence like last time, and there might be a big impact when we land on the lake. But there's nothing to worry about, so calm down the kids if they panic. Tell them to sit in their seats and enjoy the view."

"Ugh. Really? Leading a bunch of kids? That's so uncool."

"Damn it, kid..." Treize shook, holding back his frustration.

"Carlo," Lillia said, squatting next to Carlo and meeting his gaze.

"Yeah?"

"Look at this." She held out her hand. Between her thumb and index finger was a coin marked with a leaf. "This is the coin I was going to give you back in Lartika. Will you accept this job?"

"Well, I can't exactly turn down cold hard cash." Carlo grinned. At that moment, Lillia moved her fingertips. What had appeared to be one coin actually turned out to be two.

"One is for showing us around back in Lartika. Don't tell the policeman, okay?"

"Now you're talking, big sis!" Carlo replied, quickly snatching the coins, "So you want me to keep the kids calm if something happens? I'll do it!"

As Carlo turned and climbed down the steps, Lillia said, "I'm counting on you."

Carlo gave her a thumbs-up.

"Thanks," Treize said to Lillia, who sat in the co-pilot's seat to his right. She had the radio on her lap, and her hands were folded pointedly away from the controls.

"Hey, did you really mean what you just said? That this isn't a big problem?" Lillia asked, staring. Treize met her gaze and lightly shook his head.

"No. Frankly, I don't even know if I could land a plane this big without an instructor's help. I'm worried."

"I knew it."

"But it's best to keep them in the dark, don't you agree?"

"Yeah. To be honest, I didn't want to know, either."

"I see."

"They say that a lie is a tool of sorts, too. I'd hate to say this, but adults lie a lot. Usually to protect themselves, though," Lillia remarked without much thought. Treize's expression darkened.

"I see..." he muttered, taking his left hand off the yoke and placing it over his chest in a fist. Lillia did not pay his action much mind and continued.

"I wonder why the crew jumped? There doesn't seem to be anything wrong with the plane."

"I don't know. And why would they jump out in the middle of a charity flight, of all things? It just looks insane to me."

"They must be in the lake by now. I wonder what's happened to them."

"They had emergency life vests, so they'll stay afloat for a while. But who knows for how long?"

"Well, I'm not going to go rescue them."

"Neither am I. We should be worrying about ourselves. First, I'll practice banking. Is that all right with you?"

"Sure. I can't believe I'm saying this, but you can take over. Better than the two of us bickering over the controls together."

"Thanks."

"Well then, the yoke is yours," Lillia said, making a point of waving her empty hands.

"All right. Here we go."

Slowly, Treize tilted the yoke and gingerly stepped down on the left pedal. The seaplane tilted to the left little by little, turning in a steady, gentle arc.

"Great. This plane's a lot nicer than I expected," Treize commented.

"Do your best," Lillia cheered.

"Huh? Me?" Treize glanced over.

"No, I'm talking to the plane," she replied with a glare.

"...Of course, Milady."

The seaplane continued to turn. The compass needle moved from northwest to west-northwest, then from west-northwest to west. The sun seemed to move for them, shining directly into the cockpit.

"All right. Just a little more..."

The needle was just passing the point marked 'WEST'.

That was when streaks of red suddenly passed before their eyes. Light seemed to rain down from overhead.

"What is this?"

"Hey!"

Soon, the source of the light came into view. An amphibious fighter plane narrowly passed by overhead.

"Not good."

Treize quickly turned the yoke. The seaplane seemed to stumble for a moment before tilting to the right and returning to level position.

"Treize! It's that plane—the one we saw yesterday!" Lillia cried sharply, her voice tinged with hatred.

"I noticed. I don't believe this...how could they just open fire like that? Both today and yesterday," Treize groaned.

He leaned towards the windshield and surveyed their surroundings. A fighter plane was flying about 50 meters to their left. The fuselage was camouflaged in splotches of light green and brown paint, with the underside painted a murky blue. There was a saw-shaped mark painted on the fin.

An identical plane was following behind it.

"There. Two planes on our left. They must be with the people from yesterday—the bad guys from the Tolcasian Air Force."

"They're on our right, too. One...no, two."

Treize turned. Past Lillia's head to his right, outside the window, were two more identical planes flying at identical distances.

"Did they show up just now?" he wondered. But he quickly shot down his own question. "No, that's not it. They must have been watching us from above all along. And they must have been floored when I started banking."

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s test this out again.”

Once again, Treize attempted a left bank. The moment the seaplane began to tilt, a fighter plane on the left opened fire. Tracer shots whistled past the windshield.

“See?” Treize said, pulling the yoke back to center position. The seaplane continued due west.

“Wow, those aeroplanes have floats under them! Cool!”

“Look! He fired his gun! And the bullets are glowing!”

“I know what those are! They glow so you can see where the bullets are going.”

“On this side, too! There’s two more!”

“This is awesome! They’re flying in formation!”

“Let’s wave at them!”

“Hey!”

“Whoo!”

“Yeah!”

“Hi there!”

The cabin was whipped up in a frenzy of excitement. And from a seat in the back row, Carlo watched quietly with two coins on the palm of his hand.

“Doesn’t look like I need to do anything here.”

“They opened fire the moment we tried to bank. In other words, they want to keep this plane headed northwest, or west if that doesn’t work,” Treize speculated.

Lillia was quick to reply, “I get that. But why?”

Treize thought for a moment before responding.

“This is just a gut feeling, but I think I have the answer. It’s probably for the same reason the crew jumped out. Those planes are going to contact us soon through that.”

He was pointing at the radio on Lillia’s lap. The moment she glanced at it, a male voice suddenly escaped the speaker.

<—seaplane, come in! I assume someone is in the cockpit. Answer!>

“Whoa!” Lillia pulled back.

<Answer! I repeat, answer!> the voice said again. It was a male voice, neither very young nor old.

“What the heck...” Lillia breathed, pointing dubiously at the radio.

“See? It’s them,” Treize said. He picked up a headset from next to his seat and put it on, and wound the microphone around his neck. Then he found the end of the cord, pulled it out, and handed the jack to Lillia.

“Could you plug this in for me?”

<I know you’re listening! I re->

Lillia plugged the jack into an opening on the side of the radio. The radio went silent, but the man’s voice now began to escape from Treize’s headset.

“Argh, that’s loud,” he grimaced.

“Agreed.”

Lillia put on the co-pilot's headset and plugged it in as well.

<Can you hear me? Is anyone in the cockpit? Answer if you're listening!>

Soon, they heard another voice.

<Captain. Maybe we should fire off more warning shots.>

<I see children waving from the cabin, sir.>

<Can we open fire now? There's no one to see.>

<Only as a last resort. We will *not* waste bullets. ...I repeat, Answer if you're listening!>

Listening to the four-way conversation over the radio, Lillia turned to Treize.

"What is this? What's going on?"

Then, it struck her.

"No way..."

Treize nodded firmly.

"Yeah. The crew was working with those people on the fighter crafts. They must have agreed to fly the plane into the middle of the lake and jump off somewhere. That's what this radio was for. Those fighter planes must have been watching from overhead all along."

"Why would anyone do something like this?"

"Who knows? Maybe we should have a little chat," Treize replied, and pressed a switch on his neck. <This is the seaplane. We hear you loud and clear>

Lillia stared at Treize, bewildered.

<Who is this? There were only three crew scheduled to be on the flight. Was there a change of plans?>

The response came from the man earlier addressed as 'Captain'. His answer confirmed Treize's suspicions about the crew.

"I knew it," Treize muttered. Then, he began to spin a web of lies. <I boarded the plane to chaperone the children. I spotted the crew jumping outside and grabbed the controls. Who are you people? Why did you open fire? From your planes you seem to be part of the Air Force—state your names and affiliation!>

There was a moment of silence. What followed out of the radio was a threat.

<It doesn't matter who I am. Now, let me tell you something you'll be grateful for. Do not even think about turning. If you bank or descend, we *will* shoot you down.>

"*Grateful*!?" Lillia roared indignantly.

"Calm down. For now, let's listen to what they have to say," Treize replied, then turned to the radio with feigned outrage. <Why should we be grateful?>

<Why not? Do as we tell you, and you will live. There should be some extra parachutes left in the cargo hold. Use them to escape. We will come rescue you on the lake. You *will* escape with your lives.>

"That stupid idiot! What about the kids? They're going to leave all the kids to die!" Lillia cried. As the cockpit filled with rage, Treize nodded.

"Exactly."

"What?"

"Without anyone to fly it, this plane will fly further into the lake...and eventually it'll lose balance or fuel and crash. And it'll sink. I don't know why they're doing this, but these people *want* the seaplane to crash and disappear."

<I repeat. Use the parachutes to escape. Resistance is futile!>

The captain's voice threatened from the speakers, but Treize ignored him.

"Incidentally, if we *do* escape with the parachutes—"

"They'll obviously shoot us down in midair or on the water."

"Yeah. They'll silence us anyway. I mean, that's what they want. For everyone to die. The pilot in the middle of nowhere from yesterday, the people who tried to shoot us in the forest—they probably got in touch with this seaplane on the lake yesterday to formulate this plan."

"I see. The crazy pilot thought we'd seen them, and shot Mr. Mateo to silence him."

"That's right. That means they're willing to kill people to fulfill their plan. What in the world are they thinking?"

"Damn it..."

Lillia ground her teeth audibly even amidst the din of the engines.

<Can you hear me? Respond!>

When the seaplane stopped answering, the pilots began to talk amongst themselves.

<Let's just shoot it down, captain.>

<No. We still have time.>

<But this will speed things up.>

<I agree. Let's shoot them down at once.>

<Not yet! I have the final say in this matter!> the captain dug in, silencing the others.

Treize laughed. "Looks like some of the men still don't get the plan. They *need* this plane to go down in an accident. After all, if people somehow find the wreckage underwater and find signs it was shot down, there'll be a huge stir."

"I see. So that's why they're not opening fire." Lillia was impressed.

Treize nodded.

"But why does the local defense force want to do that?"

This time, Treize shook his head and replied, "I'm not sure yet. But now we know we have some time. As long as we keep flying straight ahead, they'll keep telling us to escape with the parachutes until this plane run out of fuel."

"Then what do we do?" Lillia pressed him. "Even if we stay at the controls until the end, we're going to crash eventually. Can we last until we reach land?"

"Of course not," Treize replied firmly.

"Then what do we do?!"

"Calm down, Lillia. Take a deep breath."

Even in her disbelief, Lillia did as she was instructed.

"All right. Now, exhale."

Lillia breathed out. She repeated the process about three times.

"Well? Feel calmer now?"

"Indeed I do, good sir," she replied with a grin. Treize made a face like he had encountered a legendary mountain monster from his hometown.

"What's what supposed to be?"

"Some of the senior-classmen girls at my school talk like this. I was making fun of them."

"Oh, I see."

“Indeed, good sir.”

The air in the cockpit grew cold.

“So, now what?” Lillia finally broke the silence, returning to her usual tone.

<Answer!>

Treize ignored the radio yet again and replied, “To be honest, I can’t think of anything that’ll get us out of this mess. We couldn’t possibly take down four fighters with a handgun, and we can’t get to safety on this craft. What about you, Lillia? Any ideas?”

Gravely, Lillia thought for a moment before looking up at Treize.

“What about this radio? Can we call for help? It doesn’t matter who.”

“I told you before, this radio’s range is only a couple of kilometers at most. That’s why they keep contacting us like this.”

“Because there’s no one else around to hear. . . Damn it.”

“What to do... We have to keep thinking. Think. Think.”

The slightest hint of desperation rose to Treize’s expression. Lillia shot a glare at the fighter plane to their right.

<We know you’re listening. There is nothing you can do. Abandon the plane and escape. Do not throw away your lives.>

It sounded like a line from a film villain. Lillia retorted angrily.

“Shut up, you liar! I’d rather just ram into one of you and take you down with me! We’re not going to lie down and die like this!” She was almost ready to yell into the microphone on Treize’s neck herself.

“...That’s it!” Treize whispered, raising his head.

Chapter 7: Wings of Greater Good

One large seaplane was flying over the blue lake, surrounded on either side by a total of four fighter crafts.

The fighters maintained a certain distance from the seaplane, almost like they were escorting it.

Meanwhile, inside the seaplane's passenger cabin,
"This is so cool! Fighter planes!"
"I wanna fly one!"
"No one ever said anything about fighter planes. I bet the Master wanted to surprise us!"
"The Master is awesome!"
"Are we gonna keep flying like this?"
The children seemed completely unconcerned.

Meanwhile, in the fighter planes,
"Dammit. No one would know if we shot them down anyway."
"I don't know who they are, but they're idiots if they don't get out of there."
The pilots muttered amongst themselves.

Meanwhile, in the seaplane's cockpit,
"What? Did you think of something, Treize?"
Lillia was grilling Treize, who sat in the pilot's seat to her left.
"I figured out a way to turn this whole situation around," he replied, meeting her gaze.
"Yeah?"
"Well...just to warn you, it's going to be really dangerous. And risky, too."
"So just run it by me. That won't cost you anything."
"All right. ...We ram into them with this seaplane."
Lillia's brow furrowed as she stared in silence. Several seconds passed before she replied,
"Are you out of your mind?"

"No. If possible, we'll have to hit them with the tip of one of the wings—our wings are pretty wide, you know. We'll hit their propellers. Not even a fighter plane could withstand that."

"I guess we could take down *one* if we got 'em while they're distracted. But what about the rest of them?" Lillia said, pointing out the obvious.

"It's simple," Treize replied, "We'll get that downed craft to send out a rescue request *for* us."

"Hmm... I see."

Lillia thought for several seconds but eventually nodded firmly, impressed. "I get what you're saying. Once the pilot ejects with a parachute, the plane will automatically send out a distress signal."

"Yeah. As long as he doesn't override it before he ejects."

“Once the signal goes off, someone will pick it up and come to rescue us. Then they won’t be able to shoot us down, either.”

“Yeah. But there are a few holes in the plan. First, there’s no guarantee that we’ll manage to take down one of them. If they evade or if *we* take critical damage, it’s over. Second, we don’t know for certain that the downed pilot will eject or that his distress signal will go off. He might even pull into a glide and make a landing somehow. Third, even if the distress signal goes off, our friends here might get impatient and shoot us down anyway. Fourth, even if they turn out to be amazingly patient people, we might not get any help at all—or worse, more of their friends might show up.”

“That’s...a lot of holes.”

“I guess ‘a few’ was kind of pushing it.”

“Anyway, there’s nothing else we can do, right?”

“Not at the moment. What do you think? Is it worth a shot? It’s up to you, Lillia.”

“Just out of curiosity, what happens if we don’t do this?”

“We either take a very optimistic outlook and take the parachutes, hoping these people will be merciful, or we somehow outfly those planes with this heavy craft.”

“Then what are the chances of survival? For *everyone* on board.”

“Close to zero—no, maybe not even,” Treize replied firmly. Lillia nodded, and with a glare, smiled.

“Let’s do this. We’ll wipe their smug grins off their faces.”

“There’s going to be some worse turbulence soon, so tell the kids to put on their seat belts.”

“All right.”

Lillia and Carlo were next to the cargo hold. Because the seaplane was shaking slightly, they were both holding onto the handrails.

“And make sure to tell them that the fighter planes might give them a cool air show, too.”

“Got it. And don’t worry, I’m not gonna charge for this stuff.”

“You’re a good kid. I’m counting on you,” Lillia said, and bent down to give Carlo a light kiss on the forehead. He did not seem particularly pleased.

“Save your kisses for big bro. I’m sure he’d be happy to get one.”

“Hah hah. Maybe if I feel like it.”

“You have to, okay?”

They parted ways laughing. When Lillia returned to the cockpit, Treize was purposely shaking the plane while spouting lies into the radio.

<I’ve never flown a plane before, damn it! I’m just going through the motions with common sense! This thing’s been unstable for a while now—what am I supposed to do?>

Lillia held up her thumb as she returned to her seat, approving of Treize’s performance. She put on her headset and heard the captain’s voice.

<Like I said, you can escape without the children. Your plane is going to crash into the lake no matter what you do. You can still get out alive. Once we abandon you, even that chance will be lost. Think carefully.>

“You think they’re buying it?”

"I don't know. But I'll keep acting desperate," Treize replied, hard at work shaking up the plane.

Lillia strapped herself in. Then, she checked that Treize was also secure.

"I'm ready."

"Me too."

"Then we're set," Lillia said, leaning back and placing her arms over the armrests. When she glanced over, Treize was looking at her. She had never seen such a serious look on his face.
"What?"

"I just want to tell you something in case this doesn't work out. ...Sorry. I'm really sorry."

Lillia burst out laughing. "Pfft! C'mon, save that for *after* you fail. We won't know how things turn out until we try. ...Oh, that's right. If things work out and we get out of this in one piece..."

"Yeah?"

"I'll give you a kiss."

"Wha?" Treize gaped, looking more surprised than ever.

Lillia grinned. "On the forehead. I gave one to Carlo earlier, and he says you'd be happy if I kissed you too."

"Hah hah...hah. On the forehead. Right"

"All right, let's do this! Right? Left? Have you decided?"

"I'll go for the right. That way they won't try to shoot immediately because we'll be turning northward."

"Great! Get started, Treize. This is an order!"

"Yes, ma'am!" Treize replied with a smile and closed his eyes.

When he opened them, exhaling softly, a grave look had risen to his face. He glared at the instruments, the windshield, and the sky.

"Let's do this."

With his right hand he grabbed a throttle lever overhead. And he pulled all four of them in turn.

The engines sped up. A moment later, the massive seaplane slipped past the fighter crafts.

<Whoa! What's happening?> he cried into the microphone, putting on the most convincing act of his life, <The engines! There's something wrong with the engines! Damn it!>

With a cry, he confirmed the position of the closest plane to their right. Lillia ducked out of his line of sight.

The seaplane began to fly further away.

<Captain!>

<Speed up!>

Seconds later, all four fighter planes also accelerated—even faster than the seaplane. There were only about three seconds before they caught up. Then,

"There!"

Treize pulled the yoke to the right and slammed down on the right pedal. The seaplane banked heavily to the right, and the sky outside seemed to tilt. The fighter planes also tilted, drawing closer.

<Look out!>

The warning came from the furthest plane to their right. It quickly swerved to the right and changed course, but the other pilot was delayed as he followed his comrade's movements.

“Huh?”

The moment he looked forward again,

“Whoa!”

He could see the seaplane's right wing over the windshield. The long, thick wing gleamed silver as it bore down on his plane.

“Take this!” Treize cried. The tip of the wing hit the fighter plane. The latter's propeller dug into the wing, and there was a faint metallic screech.

“All right!” Lillia cheered. Treize immediately pulled the yoke away. The seaplane was back to level position.

The fighter plane they rammed was left without a propeller. The fragments flew past in the air. The plane continued to follow the seaplane for about three seconds as though nothing had happened. Then,

“Huh? Argh!”

It tilted forward and began to plummet, the pilot's scream following it. From the engine came a trail of white smoke.

<Captain! A collision! 03 has collided!>

<Damn it! The bastard did this on purpose!>

<Calm down! I'll take care of this. You two, maintain formation.>

Tense voices filled the radio as Treize slipped into the conversation. <Argh! What's happening?! The plane is going out of control!>

“...Pfft.”

Lillia snorted, unable to hold back her laughter.

The seaplane had come out of the turn, and was now flying placidly northward. The right wing had a dent about two meters down the tip, but the wings were long enough for them to continue unhindered.

Below, a fighter plane plunged towards the lake in a trail of smoke.

The children in the cabin saw everything clearly.

“Wow! Something's falling!”

“No way!”

“Let me see!”

Taking off their seat belts, the children crowded on the right side.

“Whoa!”

“It really is crashing! Cool!”

“Awesome!”

They were having the time of their lives, their faces plastered against the windows.

“Wonder if that fighter plane's gonna be okay.”

“Of course it's gonna be fine. I told you, it's all one big show. Cool, right?” Carlo said as the children trilled in excitement.

“Yeah!” they replied.

Though the cabin was in a frenzy, the voices on the radio seemed even louder.

<Captain! He took out my propeller! The engine lamp! There’s smoke everywhere!>
cried the panicked pilot inside the falling plane.

<Calm down. You’re going to be fine—your floats are still intact. Glide into a landing.
It’s going to be all right.>

Keeping the falling plane within sight, the captain tried to pacify the pilot as he slid into an inverted flight.

<But sir! The warning—the smoke—it’s over! It’s finished! I’m ditching the plane!>

<Calm down. You are *not* finished. When is your birthday? Answer the question.>

<None! I can’t find my birthday! The smoke!>

<Take a deep breath, then think. You still have enough altitude.>

<I can’t find it! I’m losing altitude! The warning signal! Argh! I can’t, sir! I have to escape!>

<Shut off your engine. Your plane is tilting 60 degrees to the right. Return to level position. Keep your eyes on the instruments. Try it. You can do this.>

“C’mon, ditch it! Ditch it already!”

The captain remained perfectly calm, while Lillia prayed desperately in the seaplane cockpit for the pilot to escape. And about 10 seconds after the impact,

<I CAN’T!>

With that, the pilot’s signal cut off.

“I wonder what happened?”

“Who knows?”

It had been about 30 seconds since the last transmission. Around the seaplane flew three fighter crafts still, including the captain’s.

“I guess I should take a moment to apologize,” Treize said, pressing the talk button.

<This is the seaplane. What happened? Did we collide?>

<Shut your trap!>

First came angry swearing.

<Who told you you could turn, damn it?!>

<I-I’m sorry! The plane was just flying out of control... What happened?> Treize replied.

<I don’t buy that. I know you did that on purpose! ...Damn it, I’ll shoot you down this instant!>

<Hey, stop this. Wait for the captain’s orders,> the other pilot cut in, calming down his friend.

“This is getting interesting. Wanna join in, Lillia?” Treize offered. Lillia pointed at herself, surprised.

“Me?”

“I’m sure hearing a woman’s voice is going to catch them off-guard. Now we just have to stall for time like our lives depend on it. Try your nicest, most proper lady voice.”

“That’s a tall order.”

Lillia pressed the talk button. <Save me! I don't want to die!>

She managed a surprisingly lovely voice.

"What do you think?" Lillia asked, quickly turning to Treize.

"Not bad," he replied.

<Hey...who was that just now? Answer me!>

<Look, there's another chaperone onboard with us! Please, don't hurt her!> Treize pleaded, returning to his incredible act. "A few more lines please, Lillia. Like you're losing your mind." He did not forget to direct Lillia's performance, either.

<Help! I don't want to be here anymore!>

<What the...hey. Why's the woman onboard?>

<I-I came along to make sure the children wouldn't be frightened. Please, don't shoot me!>

"Wow, you're sounding pretty cute," Treize said, stifling his laughter. Lillia's left fist shot out and hit him in the shoulder.

"Ow."

<We've been saying all this time—you have the parachutes. Jump out of the plane, and you'll live! Decide quick! We're going to blow your plane to smithereens!>

The incensed pilot flew ahead of the seaplane and moved the fighter craft's flaps in a show of hostility.

"Man, if we were on a fighter plane I'd have shot him down by now," Lillia muttered.

"It's going well for now. We've cleared the first hurdle."

<Jump outta there, dammit!> the pilot cried, but he was cut off by the captain.

<Enough. Return to formation.>

<Captain!>

<Captain, what about 03?> asked the other pilot. Lillia and Treize gulped.

<Do not worry. He managed to eject on time. We'll pick him up on the lake later.>

<Great!>

<Yes, sir!>

The pilots cheered.

"Awesome!" "That's the second hurdle!"

But Lillia and Treize were even more ecstatic about the news. They cheered and hugged each other.

"Now we just keep stalling," Treize said, pressing the talk button.

<How's the pilot down there? Is he safe?> he asked, genuinely concerned.

<Yes. Although that has nothing to do with you bastards,> the captain replied. Treize breathed a sigh of relief.

"Hear that?" Lillia pointed out. "He's added a 'bastards'."

"You think we're becoming friends?"

"You should ask him."

"Heh. Never mind. What if he asks me out to tea?"

As Lillia and Treize joked, the other pilots spoke up.

<Captain. There's a woman on the seaplane.>

<I heard. You, respond.>

“What the heck,” Lillia groaned. <Why...why would you do something so awful?!>
She was only half acting.

“Seriously. Are they out of their minds?”

<I’m sorry to say this, but that seaplane must crash,> the captain replied.

<Why? I don’t understand.>

<You wouldn’t understand, even if we told you,> the captain said immediately.

“All right. Keep the questions going,” Treize encouraged Lillia.

<You can’t say for sure until you’ve told us!>

There was no response.

<Why would you do this? Why? Do you want to bring tragedy to the motherland?>

Five seconds passed in silence. Lillia reached for the talk button again—

<...No. The very opposite.>

The captain finally spoke.

“The opposite?” Treize frowned.

<What do you mean by that?>

<Those children on the seaplane,> the captain replied, his voice endlessly calm, <they are going to die for Tolcasia’s future.>

Lillia and Treize exchanged quizzical glances.

“What’s he saying?”

“We’ll hear him out. We’ve still got fuel left, right?”

“Yeah. Go on and keep up the native Tolcasian act.”

Lillia pressed the talk button. At that point, Treize spotted the captain’s plane overhead on the left side.

<I don’t understand. These poor, unfortunate children just received a chance for a new life under the Master’s care. So why do they have to die for our future?>

Lillia was barely acting at this point. Treize glanced at her profiled face, hands still firm on the controls.

<Their deaths will be a noble sacrifice,> the captain replied, <They will change Tolcasia’s fortunes.>

“Huh? What’s he mean?” Treize wondered out loud. Lillia repeated his sentiments on the radio.

The captain did not reply, for a time. But several seconds later, as Lillia and Treize exchanged glances again—

<Once the seaplane crashes and the children die, the tragic and shocking news will be the talk of the Confederation,> the captain said.

“True.” Treize nodded. “Roxche’s in a state of peace, so it’ll definitely be newsworthy—cameramen from TV stations are going to flock to the country instantly.”

<Once that happens, those who do not know of our pitiful state—and those who knew but chose to ignore us—will turn their attention to Tolcasia. All of Roxche will know what is happening here. That is why the children will die.>

“Seriously?” Treize gasped, looking over at the plane to his right and the pilot inside.

<...What...did you say?> Lillia stammered, also unable to believe her ears. She was almost out of character at this point.

<Those children will become the centerpiece of a tragedy. The tragedy will unite Tolcasia and bring us aid from the Capital District. They will become the foundation of our livelihood. Now that our tourism industry is floundering and our portion of the budget has been cut, this is the only way left to us.>

<Wait...so you're going to murder a bunch of children and make it look like an accident, just to get some pity from the Capital District? Are you insane?>

<We debated long and hard to get to this point. There is no turning back. We must move forward,> the captain said firmly. Lillia cut off their conversation and turned to Treize.

“...They really are out of their minds. The only thing sane about this guy is his voice.”

Treize said nothing, meeting Lillia’s gaze.

“They’re crazy. There’s just no other—”

“Lillia.”

“What?”

Treize put on a half-smile. “Their plan might actually work.”

“What the—Treize! How could you even think that way?!” Lillia cried.

“Calm down. ...Lillia. When you first came to Lartika and saw how tough things were for the locals, it made you think, didn’t it? You felt guilty that you didn’t know anything about how hard they had it here, right?”

“Huh? Er...well, yeah.”

“Exactly. The people in the Capital District just don’t know. They’re living their peaceful and plentiful lives, completely ignorant of what’s happening here. They’re practically *bored*, even. And suppose that’s when the news hits—dozens of dead orphans, weeping matrons, and the destitute lives in the background of it all. Playing every day on television and radio. How would people react?”

“I...”

“I think they’d get angry and sad, just like you did yesterday. Right? I mean, I don’t think this plan of theirs is going to solve all their problems, like poverty. But it’ll be a start.”

“Urgh...but still! You can’t seriously agree with this plan!” Lillia snapped, but Treize almost looked amused.

“A plane crashes and kills two dozen children in a tragic accident. Could anyone imagine that it wasn’t an accident after all? That Tolcasia’s very own military had planned it? Suppose we never came on this trip. You’re bored in the Capital District when you turn on the television and happen to see the news. Would anyone possibly think that their own military was responsible?”

Lillia was silent.

“I hate to say this, but this plan is incredible. It’s so outrageous and reckless. Whoever thought of this is either a genius of a tactician or a madman. Or both,” Treize said, amazed. Lillia was furious.

“This is no time to be impressed!”

“Well, no. But it’s astonishing to see this is the answer to all the mysteries.”

“You idiot!” she roared, glaring. “That’d better not mean you’re fine with us and all the kids getting killed!”

“Of course not.”

“I’m glad you haven’t gone crazy.”

Treize chuckled bitterly and pressed the talk button. <Let me ask you one thing. Who thought of this plan? Was it you, Captain?>

<A pointless question,> the captain replied tersely.

“So I guess it wasn’t him,” Treize mumbled.

<I don’t believe this!> Lillia cried into the microphone, her rage mounting. <Soldiers are supposed to protect their countrymen! Sacrificing these children to save Tolcasia? What a joke! This is all backwards! It’s not too late—you better realize how idiotic this plan is, right now!>

“Scary,” Treize whispered, shrinking back. Lillia was not even bothering with her performance anymore.

<For the future of Tolcasia? As if! These kids you’re trying to kill *are* the future of Tolcasia! You idiots can bash those twisted heads of yours into a wall for all I care!> Lillia bellowed.

<I suppose trying to reason with you was pointless after all. This conversation is over. You may be kindhearted, but kindness won’t save our country. Power will. Tolcasia is fading from Roxche’s memory as we speak. We must turn the eyes of the lazy and rich Capital District citizens to this land. We carry out this mission in the name of the greater good. We will lead Tolcasia to a bright future.>

Wide-eyed and lost for words, Lillia trembled. She could not hold back her anger.

“*That’s* why you’re going so far...? These children’s lives...Mr. Morseau’s kindness...do they mean nothing to you...?”

His hands still on the yoke, Treize cast a sidelong glance at Lillia.

<This is my final warning. You two can still escape. Once we pick up our fellow pilot, we will come back for you. I swear it on my honor. We may limit your movement, but we will spare your lives. I will let you see how this country changes through this sacrifice.>

There was something both threatening but understanding about the captain’s tone. Lillia pressed the talk button.

<You people...> She took her finger off the button; then, she took a deep breath and pressed it again. <...are *awful!* There’s no way we’ll do what you say!>

Her cry rode the airwaves, echoing kilometers through the sky.

<You’re *villains!* You shouldn’t be allowed to call yourselves soldiers, pilots, or even *humans!* I guarantee you’re not going to die peaceful deaths! ‘Tolcasia’s future’? ‘Noble sacrifice’? Letting innocent people die for any reason is nothing but terrorism! It’s a crime!>

“They might really shoot us down at this rate...” Treize whispered to himself.

The other pilots did not reply. But over the radio they could hear the captain coldly issuing orders.

<I’ll shoot them down. You cover the sides, but make sure to keep a distance. We don’t want any more collisions.>

<Yes, sir.>

<Yes, sir.>

Treize glanced out the left windshield. One of the two fighter planes had disappeared behind them, and the other began to bank away.

“Figures.”

He tightened his grip on the yoke and checked the throttle levers overhead.

<You two, on the seaplane. I am behind you now. This conversation is finished. Any last words?>

The death sentence.

“Well, I’d prefer not to leave my last words yet...” Treize muttered without pressing the talk button.

But not Lillia.

<Yeah! A whole lot of them! You people are insane! You’re not some bringers of greater good, and you’re not leading Tolcasia to the future! You’re just fanatics! Criminals! Acknowledging even *one* person like you is going to make innocent people suffer! I will *never* forgive you! You’re the ones who should be jumping out that plane and cooling off in the lake, you bastards!>

“Hah...hah...”

Lillia’s shoulders rose and fell as she panted. Treize turned.

“Lillia.”

“Hah...hah...what?”

Treize took a breath, ready to say, ‘Well said’. At that moment—

<Well said!>

“Whoa!?” “Eek!”

Treize yelped at the sudden voice. Lillia also reached up to her headphones, shocked. The voice belonged to a woman.

“What was that?”

Five meters behind the seaplane, the pilot muttered in shock at the sudden voice. A second later,

“Whoa!”

A dark shadow fell from overhead, before his eyes and the sights, crossing in front of the seaplane. He reflexively pulled back.

<Well said! Really, that was great. Yep!>

An amused female voice filled the airwaves.

“Huh?” “Oh!”

Lillia and Treize recognized the voice.

A lone fighter craft rose before their eyes.

The plane was pitch-black, both the fuselage and the wings a plain matte. There were no markings, numbers, or words that indicated its affiliation; only the painted words ‘NO STEP’ and ‘FUEL CAP’ were visible.

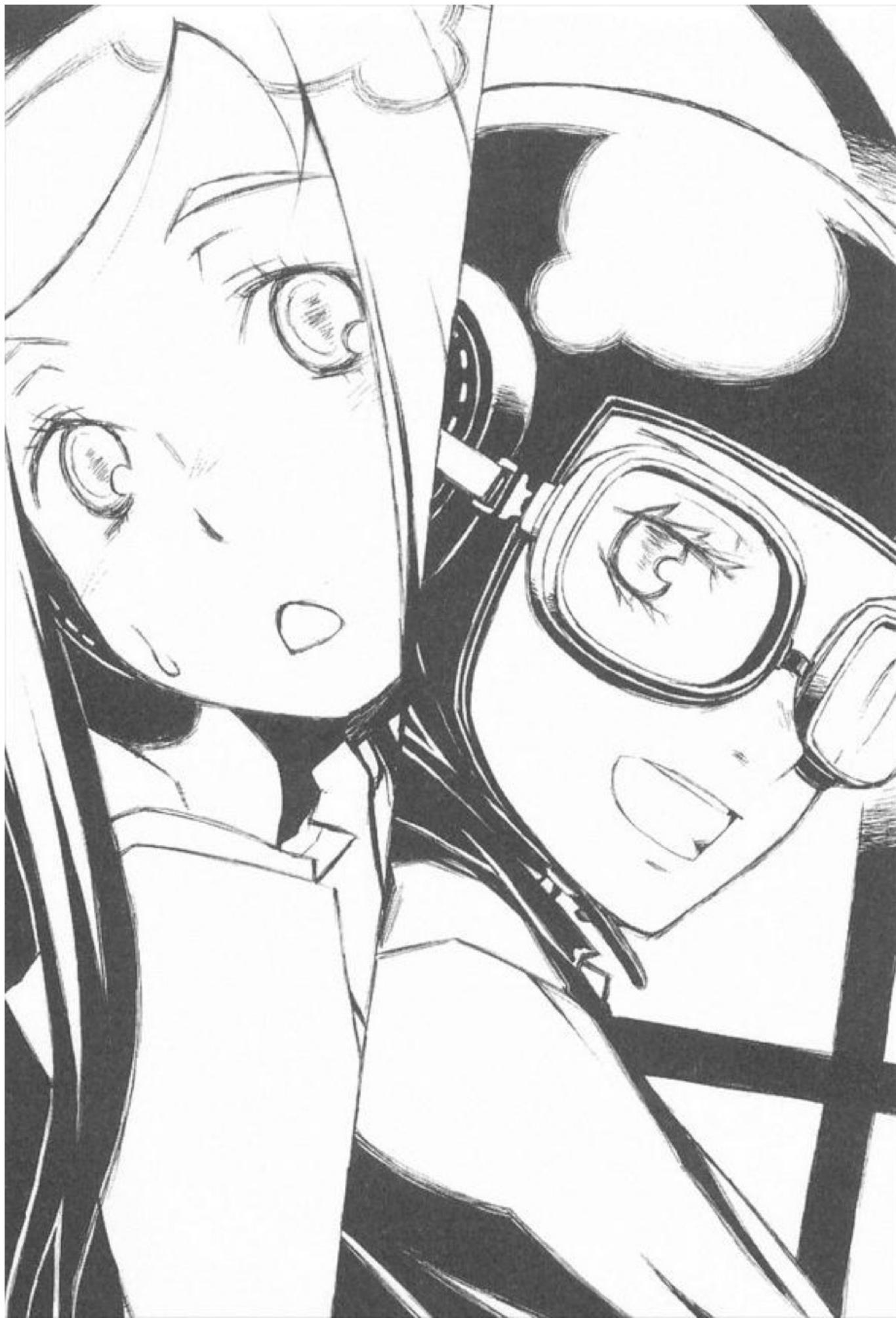
The new craft was a large model with a wingspan of about 10 meters. It was twice the size of the Tolcasian planes, and the landing gear was completely stowed to reduce air resistance. A three-bladed propeller spun at the nose, and the wings spread out from the bottom of the fuselage.

The fighter craft tilted left, moving over to the right side of the seaplane's cockpit. The pilot in the cockpit, which was domed in glass, glanced at Lillia and Treize. With the plane still tilted the pilot raised their goggles with their left hand. A pair of eyes as blue as the sky in the distance winked at the duo.

<Hey there. Having a good time?>

<M-Mom...?> Lillia's jaw dropped.

<That's right!>



Allison Whittington Schultz grinned and did a half barrel-roll, bearing down on the amphibious fighter craft on the right.

“Argh!”

The bewildered pilot yelled and tried to flee. But instead of chasing it down, Allison’s plane accelerated in the blink of an eye. She banked easily to the right and made a hard turn, crossing the seaplane from right to left.

“That’s Mom...”

“Yeah. It’s Allison.”

And in one elegant motion, the black fighter craft bore down on the amphibious unit from the front.

<Hey, you there! Ratatatatatatatatatat!> Allison mimicked the sound of gunfire, charging toward the craft.

The pilot was too shocked to scream, let alone evade.

<Ratatatatatatatatatat!>

Allison cheered like a child and passed before his eyes.

A second later.

“Ah... AAAAARGH!”

The amphibious craft finally dodged left.

Having chased off three fighter crafts from the seaplane in a matter of seconds, Allison flew along the seaplane’s left side and did a barrel roll, then moved her wing flaps back and forth.

<Sorry to keep you waiting! It looks like you’re holding up all right.>

<Mom! How’d you get here?>

<You called me, didn’t you? I heard the SOS and flew straight over. Then I heard all the shouting. I bet they’re listening to us as we speak.>

<Thank you, Allison. But how did you get here so quickly?> asked Treize.

<That’s a secret. I’ll tell you later,> Allison replied, moving from the upper left to the rear of the seaplane. At the same time, she spoke into the radio. <Attention, pilots of the Tolcasian Air Force crafts. Can you hear me? Respond if you can’t.>

There was no answer. Allison continued.

<From this point on, I forbid any approach on this seaplane. Return to your base and surrender to the Confederation MPs waiting there. Let me put that another way—stop bothering the children and go let your mothers tell you off.>

“That’s Allison for you...” Treize whispered, slowly and gently banking to the left. The compass needle went from west to west-southwest to southwest.

The black fighter craft was behind the seaplane. Allison scanned every direction from her cockpit.

Then, as the seaplane turned southward—

“There.”

Her blue eyes spotted three fighter planes flying in formation towards her.

<Seaplane, three enemy crafts spotted in the six o’clock direction. Maintain course.>

<Understood,> Treize replied immediately.

<This is a message for the Tolcasian Air Force fighter crafts. If you get any closer, things will get ugly. This is a warning, even if doesn't sound like one.>

<Is this a joke? Don't interfere,> the captain replied.

<I hate to say this, but my craft is much more powerful than yours. Your chances of victory are nil. Surrender immediately. Do you understand? I don't want to be a bully,> Allison said. There was no response.

Instead, the captain issued orders to his men.

<02. 04. Engage the black unit. I'll take care of the seaplane.>

<U-understood.>

<But her plane's too—>

<Calm down. I've never seen an aeroplane like this in the Confederation's forces. It's likely unarmed—if it weren't, it would have launched a surprise attack from the start.>

<I see...yes, sir.>

“Seriously? Man, I warned them,” Allison mumbled and lowered her goggles again. The sunlight glinted off the surface and hid her eyes from view.

Meanwhile.

“What do we do?”

“Exactly what we're told to do,” Treize answered Lillia's question, and gave the throttle lever a slight pull. The seaplane began to accelerate.

“Will the kids be all right?” Lillia wondered, suddenly remembering the passenger cabin.

“We'll just have to trust in Carlo,” replied Treize.

“Yeah.”

Meanwhile, in the cabin.

Carlo looked down the aisle, astonished.

All 22 children in the warm cabin were lying asleep on the large, squashy seats.

“I'm still on the clock. Can't go to sleep yet,” he muttered, “but I'm sleepy.”

Of the three fighter crafts following the seaplane, 02 and 04 switched course and made for Allison's plane. The captain turned to the seaplane.

“There.”

Allison pulled the throttle lever to accelerate. Her aeroplane shook as it charged towards the two enemy crafts.

“Huh?”

The pilot of 02 watched in horror as the black craft grew larger and larger in his sights at an alarming rate.

<Left! Bank!>

The voice of 04's pilot spurred him to quickly turn left. Allison's craft passed between them in a flash in a steep climb. As it slowed to a crawl in the midst of the perpendicular climb,

the black plane swerved suddenly and headed straight for 02, which had turned left. At the same time, it accelerated as it fell.

<02! Behind you!>

<I see it. Shit, it's too fast!>

As quickly as it could, 02 banked at a right angle. Allison's aeroplane was on its heels. No amount of banking could shake her off.

<Keep going! I'll take care of it.>

The pilot of 04 desperately chased after them. Pushed to its limit, the engine screamed and the fuselage seemed to rattle.

Approximately three seconds after closing in behind 02 and Allison's plane—

"So it comes to this," Allison mumbled in her tilted seat. She pulled the trigger on the control stick to her right, opening fire.

Light spewed from the black fighter plane.

A pair of lights shot out of the nose. The two 20mm machine guns mounted atop the fuselage, in front of the cockpit, had fired. The shots flew between the spinning propellers and were sucked into the plane ahead.

The barrage was over in an instant, but the 02's fin and its saw-shaped mark were vaporized. The rest of the tail also scattered.

"Argh!"

With nothing to stabilize it, 02 was left uncontrollable and ended up spiraling to the left.

<You'd better get out of there,> Allison warned over the radio, and glanced back.

"Damn you!" the pilot of 04 cried, putting his finger on the trigger. The black craft was in his sights.

Shots flew from either side of the amphibious plane. But the rounds disappeared into the air, leaving nothing but faint smoke in their trail.

"What?!"

The black fighter craft had disappeared from his sights.

"Where are you?"

The moment he raised his head, the black fuselage materialized upside-down overhead. Like a raven, or perhaps the shadow of death, it blocked out the sun and cast darkness into the cockpit. He could see the pilot of the unit staring back at him. Her goggles reflected nothing, like the sockets of a skull. There was a smile playing at the woman's lips.

"Ah—"

But that was for only an instant. The shadow disappeared behind him.

A second later, 04's engine began spewing white smoke. The long, thin afterimages of the machine gun's tracer shots looked almost like arrows of light slamming into the engine.

"Damn it!"

Pitch-black oil spurted from the engine and instantly smudged the windshield.

"Damn it... Shit! Shit!" the pilot cried. The oil continued to spread over the windshield, and the white smoke knew no end. The rumbling of the engine became more and more pronounced.

<You'd better escape, too. Invert the craft and make sure your feet don't get caught on the way,> advised the woman who shot him down.

"Shit!"

With one final howl, the pilot of 04 pulled the emergency lever to open the canopy. The window was blasted backwards, frame and all. Wind assaulted his face.

A pilot plummeted from the upside-down amphibious craft as it flew in a trail of smoke. Several seconds after the drop, a round parachute activated over the lake. Further in the distance was another parachute, floating in the water.

"Two down."

Allison looked over at where she expected to find the seaplane. And there it was. It was small in the distance as it descended. The last of the amphibious fighter crafts was on its tail.

Allison changed heading, and with her left hand pulled the throttle lever.

Six vents unfolded on either side of the front of the fuselage, where the engine was. Flames began spewing from them.

The rotation intensified dramatically. And with the roar of the engine before it, the black fighter craft accelerated as though it had been kicked forward.

"Just a little more...make sure only the engine is damaged...leave no evidence of a deliberate attack..."

The seaplane was in the fighter craft's sights. The captain fixed the crosshairs on one of the engines atop the seaplane's wings.

Though the seaplane was flying away as fast as it could, there were only a few meters between it at the captain's plane. The captain focused solely on the sights and lightly adjusted the control stick and the pedals. Then he took aim at the leftmost engine.

His right index finger touched the trigger.

"Please. Let this work..."

But a moment later, the seaplane vanished from his sights. It sped to the bottom right at an unthinkable speed.

"What?"

He did not comprehend. As the captain stared, bewildered, the sparkling lake came into view.

"No!"

He took his eyes off the crosshairs and looked up. Only then did he realize that his craft was tilted. Quickly, he pulled the control stick to right himself—that was when the voice came over the radio.

<Oh, I'm sorry. I must have bumped into you.>

The captain rapidly scanned his surroundings and finally spotted the black fighter craft above him to the right.

<Damn you!>

<I just couldn't leave you to do something so awful.> Allison said.

Several seconds earlier, she had swiftly caught up with the captain's craft as he was distracted by the seaplane, slipping under his right side and pushing up the amphibious fighter's

wing with her left wing. That was how the captain's plane had suddenly flipped to the side against his will.

<Your two friends made their escape. You're the only one left. That's enough struggling, don't you think? You did your best, and now it's time for you to go home,> Allison said amicably and slowly approached the amphibious plane. Immense mental pressure came over the captain.

<Don't mess with me!> he cried, heaving the throttle lever and the control stick.

Allison's plane overtook the amphibious craft as the latter stalled.

Now the tables were turned. The captain was the one after Allison. Abandoning the seaplane, they began to accelerate.

And soon, they entered Lillia and Treize's sights.

"Hey, he's going after Mom!"

"Huh?"

Treize, who had been glaring at the instrument panel with his hands on the yoke for some time, finally looked up and slightly pushed back the throttle lever.

Outside, they could see the black fighter craft and the amphibious plane engaged in a twisted game of tag.

"He's gaining on her—opening fire!"

Lights spewed from the amphibious plane, flashing between the two fighters. Allison continued to flee.

Soon, Treize turned his attention from them to the anxious Lillia. "It's okay. She's doing that on purpose to lure him in."

"What?"

"See how she always waits until the last second to evade? Allison's craft is much faster than his. She could outfly him easily if she wanted to."

"Then..."

As Lillia trailed off, the captain howled into the radio.

<Stop running away, woman!>

Even the sound of his machine gun fire came over the airwaves.

"See? The captain's losing his composure. At this rate he'll run out of ammo, and Allison will win without having to shoot him down," Treize remarked.

<That's enough of your futile resistance,> Allison scolded the captain, <Surrender peacefully, and I guarantee that you will be treated with all due respect. Obviously you'll be imprisoned and courtmartialed, but I'll butter up the guards and have ice cream delivered to everyone in prison.>

<Enough!>

<Hey, mint ice cream is great if you've never tried it.>

<Die!>

<Oh, you missed. Then how about chocolate? You know, my daughter loves both flavors.>

<Damn you!>

<She never listens to me, even when I tell her she'll gain weight. Apparently she's got a separate stomach for dessert or something...>

<Stop moving, damn it! Hah...hah...>

The game of tag went on for what seemed to be an eternity. Missed rounds and empty shell casings rained across the lake.

<Missed again. You could really use some target practice. Are you getting enough training? I expected more from the commander here—your subordinates were much more interesting to fight.>

<Enough! Shit! Shit!>

As the captain roared into the microphone, Treize mumbled, “I’m almost starting to feel sorry for him.”

“He deserves that much, if nothing else,” Lillia declared.

“I’m sure he’s a good person on the inside. He just struck out like this because he was so passionate about helping his country.”

“That doesn’t mean you should sympathize. Him and the guy who shot Mr. Mateo—they can say whatever they want in court.”

“Court, huh,” Treize mumbled.

<You just keep missing and missing.>

Allison’s voice came over the radio again. The two fighter crafts were circling the air before the seaplane. There were more flashes of light, and the sound of gunfire came to an end.

<See? That’s what happens when you open fire so recklessly. You run out of ammo. That’s enough now. I can even give you some time to go back for your friends.>

<I don’t need your sympathy,> the captain replied.

<Surrender, please. Your plan was a failure. Go back and rescue your subordinates,> Allison said gently.

Silently, Treize glanced at Lillia.

<Hah hah hah...no. It’s not over. It’s not over yet!> the captain cried with a howl of laughter.

“Huh?” Treize gasped.

Lillia asked him what was wrong.

“He dropped his floats...”

Lillia looked around and quickly spotted the amphibious plane. Just as Treize said, the large floats underneath it were gone. She could see them spinning towards the water below.

“What’s he up to? Now he won’t be able to land.”

“No way—”

<It’s not over yet!>

They grimaced.

<You idiot! Stop!> Allison cried.

And as Lillia and Treize listened in horror—

<Not yet!>

The captain charged at the seaplane.

“No!” “Ah!”

The tiny craft in the distance seemed to balloon into their sight.

“He’s going to ram us!”

“Get out of the way!” Lillia cried. But Treize did not move the yoke.

"It's no use. Besides—"

<Your Highness!> Allison cried. At the same time, the black fighter craft broke out of its turn and chased after the amphibious plane.

<Yes?>

<Maintain course! You'll be in the safe zone if you continue that way! Maintain course at all costs!>

<Yes, ma'am!>

Treize firmly gripped the yoke.

<Glory to Tolcasia!>

There was an ear-splitting cry of madness and euphoria.

The black fighter craft followed just behind it.

Powerful 30mm machine gun rounds shot out the front of the craft. The strands of light pierced the captain's plane.

There was a metal plate in the back of his cockpit to protect him, but the armor-piercing rounds shattered through and went off in the captain's head, turning it to fine red mist. Death came so quickly he had no time to feel pain. It was instant.

Even after death, his right hand was fixed on the control stick. The masterless craft continued to rush towards the seaplane.

Allison tilted her right hand slightly, taking aim at the right side of the craft's main wing. Her shots all made contact, breaking the wing itself.

With a flurry of sparks and fire, the right wing fell off the fuselage. The lift from the remaining wing forced the plane into a violent right turn.

The fighter plane with the corpse in its cockpit spun like a top as it plummeted to the right side of the seaplane.

Treize was watching the approaching fighter plane to the end.

The face of the man as he cried out behind the windshield. The black plane looming behind him like the reaper. The light spewing from Allison's plane, swooping down like a scythe. And the red mist.

The two planes converged for a single second before diverging—the amphibious plane covered in black smoke to the lower left, and the jet-black fighter craft disappearing to the upper right.

The seaplane continued to fly over the lake as though nothing had ever happened.

Several seconds later.

"Did we make it...?" asked Lillia.

"Yeah. *We* did, anyway." Treize replied.

Meanwhile, in the passenger cabin,

Carlo was leaning against the window in a seat at the very back, his mouth gaping open as he slept.

Chapter 8: No Other Choice

The seaplane was flying over the lake.

Its right wing was slightly damaged, but the massive plane continued to fly smoothly.

Next to it flew a fighter plane.

The pitch-black craft was on alert, doing figure-eights in the seaplane's vicinity.

<All right, Treize. Time for you to show us what you're made of,> Allison said from the fighter craft.

Treize replied from the seaplane, <We've come this far; I'll land this plane safely no matter what. But to be honest, I'm not sure if I can pull it off. I'm not confident that I can.>

"What the heck, Treize? We're almost done here. You can do it. Remember what you said your flight instructor said? All planes are the same!" Lillia said from next to him.

"You've got to be kidding..." Treize trailed off. Then he said into the microphone, <Allison, do you know anything about this model? Have you ever flown something like this?>

"Probably not," Lillia quipped.

<I'm sorry, Treize. All I've been flying these days are fighter planes.>

"See?"

<All right. Listen up, both of you. I'm going to give you an important piece of advice,> Allison said. Lillia and Treize exchanged glances and nodded.

"Wonder what she's gonna say?"

"I can't wait to hear it."

Allison descended in front of the seaplane and advised,

<All planes are the same.>

Then she twirled around excitably.

"Mom..."

"That's exactly what he said..."

Lillia and Treize cast disappointed glances at the spinning plane.

"Hey big sis! It looked like things were winding down, so I just took a quick break. I swear I did my job!"

"Oh, thanks. But that's not important right now."

"Oh."

Lillia was talking with Carlo in the passenger cabin. Some of the children were looking out the windows, but most were still napping. One of the girls came up to ask how much further they had to go—Lillia replied that they would be landing soon.

"Anyway, Carlo, I need your help again. You're gonna have to get back to work."

"Okay."

"Treize is going to land this plane now. We had to change course, and we're touching down on the lake."

"Okay. And?"

"The plane's going to shake a little when we land, so wake up the kids now and tell them to put on their seat belts. And tell them to hold on tight once we descend low and you can see the water."

"Okay. I have to tell them the plane's going to shake?"

"Yep. Thanks, Carlo. Wish us luck," Lillia said, leaving the cabin.

When she returned to the cockpit, the first thing she heard was Treize replying to Allison.

<Understood. I can see from here. Continuing descent.>

When Lillia took a seat, she could see land on the horizon, tinted green. It was halfway through the afternoon but the sun was still high in the sky.

"How're the kids? Lifejackets?" asked Treize.

"The kids are fine. Most of them were asleep. But get this—we don't have any lifejackets," Lillia replied.

"Oh. Damn it..." Treize shook his head.

The black fighter plane flew ahead, suddenly plunging toward the horizon. It then began circling over a sandy beach.

"What's Mom doing?"

"She's probably dropped something to check wind direction."

"I see."

And just as Treize explained, Allison reported in.

<We've got light wind on the shore. The water's calm, too. I want you to make the approach from near the shore with the sun behind you. Just wait there and a rescue party will arrive—I've already informed the authorities. The nearest Confederation base is going to send in a seaplane.>

<Roger that. Thank you, Allison.>

Lillia jumped into the conversation.

<Mom, what about the pilots who jumped?>

<The military will pick them up too. The armed MPs will, anyway.>

<All right.>

With that, Lillia fastened her seatbelt. The seaplane slowly began to descend. Land began to fill their sights as they drew near.

Lillia did not insist on helping Treize. She simply sat and watched the shaking yoke.

"Lillia."

"Yeah?"

"I can take the cockpit alone. If I end up crashing nose-first, everyone here's going to be a goner. You'll be safer in the cabin—"

"Shut up. I'm not leaving you."

<Bank to the left. Easy does it.>

Treize did as Allison instructed. The seaplane continued to fly smoothly. It looked as though the ground was moving to their right.

<And turn again. ...Good. Excellent job.>

With the nose pointed due east, the seaplane flew almost parallel to the lakeshore. Altitude was at 300 meters.

<Thank you. I'll maintain heading and slow into descent.>

Treize gently operated the throttle levers and the control stick. Both altitude and speed began to fall.

The narrow strip of sand was dotted with rocks. Beyond was a verdant forest. Lillia looked over the land.

“I don’t see any houses or villages. It’s all trees from here.”

“That’s Tolcasia for you. Wanna take another walk after we land?” Treize joked.

“I think I’ll wait for the rescue party this time,” Lillia replied.

“Well, let’s get started,” Treize said, tense.

“Don’t worry. We already went through a lot to get here. You can do it. Give it your best shot.”

“You’re talking to the plane, aren’t you?”

“I’m talking to *you*,” Lillia said.

Treize turned, as though he remembered something. “Come to think of it...what about the kiss?”

“Not now. We’re not out of hot water yet.”

“Tch.”

“Just the landing now.”

“Okay. Then I guess I *will* have to do my best,” Treize said with a smile, and turned his gaze forward. And with a glare at the horizon and the instrument panel, he pressed the talk button. <I’ll do it. For the prize.>

<All right. Slow and steady, okay? We can try this as many times as it takes.>

“Hey, you don’t need to get into the details!” Lillia snapped. At the same time, she noticed an unusually determined look on his face.

Treize took a deep breath and pressed the talk button again.

<Captain Schultz of the Confederation Air Force. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude for your support. The blood of Ikstova is once again in your debt. I will not forget your kindness to the end of my days. Thank you.>

<You’re welcome. I expected no less from our dashing prince. Tell your parents I’m expecting a helping of stewed cheese later, okay?>

<Of course. End transmission.>

“‘Dashing prince’ is way too good for him,” Lillia grumbled.

Altitude was at 100 meters. The seaplane was closer vertically to the shore than lengthwise.

“You can do it, right?” asked Lillia.

“Yeah. As long as I can raise the nose at the right moment just before we land.”

Meanwhile, in the cabin,

“Guys! We’re gonna land now, so sit down and fasten your seat belts! Hurry! Wake up anyone who’s still asleep!”

Carlo was giving orders to the other children. Those who were lying on the seats and those who were left to sleep on the floor all opened their eyes, slowly sitting and putting on their

seat belts. Some of the children at the window seats cheered when they saw how close they were to the lake.

Fifty meters. There was more lake than sky in the cockpit window.

Twenty meters. As the plane descended lower than the fuselage was long, the forest passed beside them rather than below.

“All right! Now I just raise the nose and...”

Slowly, Treize pulled on the yoke.

The plane tilted up from being parallel to the water, and the angle between the wings and the lake began to widen.

As though running into an embrace, the seaplane approached the surface. The air between the wings and the lake created white ripples on the water and turned to sprays.

The seaplane hit the lake. The back of the fuselage was first, cutting through the water in a wake of white waves.

Soon, the front of the fuselage hit the lake as the plane slowed against the water. It finally landed with a massive splash.

“There!”

With his hands firmly on the yoke, Treize stopped the plane from bouncing back from the recoil. Then he set the throttle levers to the lowest output.

The massive seaplane moved across the lake, slowing down against the water as it barreled forward.

“I can do this...probably,” he mumbled. As the fuselage shook, it tilted forward because of deceleration.

“You can! Land this thing!” Lillia replied, clutching her seat and watching the water pass by.

Allison circled clockwise overhead and watched as the seaplane left white splashes in its wake. It was clearly slowing down.

“I can’t believe he made it on his first try. At this rate—”

She stopped.

In the brown water ahead of the seaplane were different colors. Splotches of grey. The shore there was not made of sand, but a cluster of jutting rocks.

Allison pressed the talk button.

<Seaplane, left! Left pedal!>

Reacting to the sudden command, Treize did as ordered. When he stepped down on the left pedal, the seaplane’s fin tilted left and caused the fuselage to tilt to the right. The float under the right wing supported the craft.

Inside the tilted plane, Lillia cried into the microphone, <What’s going on, Mom?>

But before she could hear an answer, the seaplane shook.

They could hear an impact under the cockpit. For a moment they felt like they were floating.

"No! It's caught on something below!" Treize said immediately. The foreign object hit the bottom of the fuselage multiple times, shaking Lillia and the plane.

"Argh! Whoa! Ack!"

<Rocks!> Allison cried from above. Jagged rocks had been hiding beneath the surface—they were connected to the rocks on the shore.

The seaplane moved past the rocks and turned slightly further into the lake.

"Damn it! Why now?" Treize swore anxiously.

The seaplane continued skidding across the surface of the lake. But they could clearly sense vibrations that they had not felt before.

"Hey, what's happening?" asked Lillia.

"Those rocks scraped the underside! They probably left holes in the fuselage."

Lillia was lost for words.

<—Seaplane, can you hear me? Are you all right?>

<The underside is breached! She might sink!> Treize replied immediately.

At the same time, he looked past Lillia's head and out the window. The flat, sandy beach was about 300 meters away.

<I'll run the craft aground before that!> Treize added, and pulled the throttle levers back to medium output.

The engines began to growl again, and the propellers spun faster. Treize stepped down on the right pedal.

The seaplane tilted left as it turned right. And, shaking in every direction, it struggled toward the beach.

The engines roared and the plane sped up. For a moment it felt as though they were on track, but in three seconds the seaplane slowed down again.

"No good, huh."

Like a person restrained by the ankles, the seaplane slowed to a crawl.

"We won't make it."

"Why not?"

"The holes on the underside are creating too much resistance. We can't move forward. This plane's going to sink soon."

With over 100 meters to go before the shore, the seaplane came to a nearly complete stop. The propellers alone continued to flounder through the air. The fuselage began tilting forward.

Treize pressed the emergency engine cutoff switch. The four engines and the propellers shook violently and stopped. At the same time, the seaplane stopped moving forward.

"There's nothing we can do. It's dangerous in here."

As the ever-present hum of the engines disappeared and stillness fell over the cockpit, Treize undid his seatbelt and stood.

Lillia stood after him. "Are we going to sink?"

"I don't know, but we have to get out of here first."

"Right. ...Oh, the kids!"

"Hope they didn't bump their heads or anything back there..."

Lillia turned and ran down the steps. Treize went after her.

The moment they passed the cargo hold and opened the cabin door—

"Hey big sis! Did we land? You were right—that was really shaky," said Carlo. The other children chimed in in agreement and glared.

"Is everyone all right? No one's hurt?" Lillia asked loudly.

The children looked around at one another. One of them answered that they were fine.

"Thank goodness," Lillia sighed.

"Not quite yet," Treize said, firmly shutting the door behind them. The fuselage continued to tilt. The water was almost up to the window next to Lillia.

"Listen up, everyone! We're going to open up the back hatch, so you have to get out of this plane! It's dangerous to stay in here!" Treize said, running down the aisle to the back of the plane.

"You heard him. We're getting out of here," Carlo spurred on the children.

"Too bad."

"Are we getting off already?"

"I'm hungry."

"Where are we?"

The children grumbled as they lined up along the aisle, with Lillia bringing up the rear. There were so many of them that once they were in the aisle, they couldn't take a step forward.

The moment Treize made it to the right hatch at the back of the cabin, he grabbed the lever with both hands. It was made so that twisting and pushing the lever at the same time would force the hatch open.

"What?"

But the lever did not budge. Even the emergency escape hatch had been locked from the outside.

"I should've shot those bastards when I had the chance..." Treize growled, fists pounding against the exit. The wooden hatch shook heavily.

Lillia raised her voice from behind the children, who were gathered near the back seats.

"What's wrong?"

"The hatch won't open. It's stuck."

"What?"

"I'm gonna have to force my way."

"Huh?"

"I'll just take out my frustration on this!"

Reaching into his belt pack, Treize pulled out his handgun and gestured away the cheering children with his left hand.

Holding the gun tightly with both hands, he undid the safety and took aim at the lever.

Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Shots shook the cabin in succession. The slide rose and fell six times, then finally stopped at the bottom. The lever's wooden base shattered.

Treize took a step back, then drew back his right foot and leapt forward with his left.

"Hah!"

And in midair, he held out his right foot. The kick landed square in the middle of the hatch, sending it flying with nothing but the lever mechanism left on the plane. Treize landed gently on both feet on the carpeted floor.

"Wow!"

“You’re so cool, mister!”

“Amazing!”

The children cheered and clapped. Sunlight spilled inside the darkened cabin, illuminating him. Humid air began pushing inside.

“All of you, climb onto the top of the plane.”

Treize threw his gun to the carpet, then lifted a nearby child over the hatch. The child climbed outside and onto the top of the seaplane.

“Next. Hold on tight so you don’t slip and fall. Next. That’s three.”

Treize continued to lift the children onto the top of the plane.

“What are we going to do after everyone’s up?” asked Lillia.

“Well, we climb to the top with them. Then...”

“Then?”

“Well, hope the plane doesn’t sink.”

“So we’re working off hopes, not plans.”

The seaplane was about 100 meters from the beach. The top of the nose was submerged, and the cockpit window was touching the water.

“Oh, they’re out.”

As Allison circled the air, she spotted the rear hatch fly open and the children climbing onto the top of the plane. soon, the children were steady atop the fuselage and the large tail.

“And that’s 22! Man, what a workout,” Treize sighed, after lifting the twenty-second child to safety. Beads of sweat dripped down his face.

The seaplane was listing even more heavily. Lillia was clinging to the seats.

“Your turn, Carlo.”

“Got it.”

Treize lifted Carlo by the underarms and raised him over the hatch. Carlo easily climbed up.

“You’re next, Lillia. ...Want some help?”

“I’m fine.”

Lillia stepped over the backs of the seats and the frame of the hatch and climbed up with ease.

Treize picked up the gun at his feet, placed it back in his belt pack, and scanned the cabin one last time. Then he whispered to the empty seats,

“...Thank you. I’m sorry I couldn’t land you properly.”

And he was out.

Outside, the back of the fuselage and the tail were crowded with children. Because the plane was tilted forward, there was an incredible view of the scenery from the tail. They were about 4 meters from the surface of the water.

There was no wind. They could hear the dry hum of the black fighter craft overhead.

The seaplane’s outer panels jutted out at regular intervals, which made it easy to climb up. Treize sat with his feet on one such panel and looked at the nose.

He could see the wings spread out over the fuselage, and the stopped engines. The nose and the windshield were almost completely underwater. The plane was 100 meters to the forest, with murky water between them.

Treize looked at the tail.

Lillia seemed to be bored. She sat between two girls who were both about 10 years old.

“Allison must have told the rescue team our location by now.”

“Yeah.” Lillia looked up at the black fighter plane circling the air. “But it’ll be bad if this seaplane sinks before they get here.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll hold out until they do!” Treize said with surprising confidence. Lillia frowned.

“What if we don’t? If the plane sinks—”

“It won’t.”

“You have proof?”

“No.”

“Then don’t act like it’s a fact. You’re acting really weird, Treize.”

“Really? …But you know, we’ve gone through so much already. Even the most evil god in the world wouldn’t put us through any more suffering.”

Immediately, the plane shifted violently and tilted right. Buoyancy and water pressure played a game of tug-of-war and the right float supports snapped.

“Eek!”

“Ah!”

“Whoa!”

Several children screamed as they fell into the lake, sending up columns of water.

“Oh no!”

Lillia pulled the girls next to her close and clung to the plane. At the same time, she leaned forward to search for the fallen children. Their heads bobbed on the water’s surface.

“Guys! Grab onto something! We’ll pull you right up!” she cried desperately.

“Don’t worry.”

“It’s fine.”

“There’s nothing to worry about,” said the children around her.

“What? …Ah!”

The plane tilted again, and yet more children fell. They quickly rose to the surface and raised their heads.

“Big sis, is the plane really okay?” Carlo asked, holding on to the tail. Lillia shook her head.

“I don’t think it’ll hold.”

“Then what are we sitting around here for? Let’s go, guys. We’ll head for the beach!”

“What? But—”

Lillia was quickly cut off.

“Okay.”

“Sure.”

“Why not?”

“Let’s go swimming.”

“All right!”

“Here I go!”

The children nodded one after another and jumped into the water.

“Yeah!”

“Whee!”

“Yahoo!”

Even the children who sat swinging their legs from the tail dropped down head-first from almost 5 meters in the air. They could hear splashes everywhere.

“Hey, the water’s warm!”

“Race you to the shore!”

“This is great!”

“Wow!”

Children chirped and chattered on the water. Listening to their voices and looking at their smiles, Lillia furrowed her brow. “... You know how to swim? ... *All* of you?”

Carlo was astonished. “Obviously. We all grew up on the lakeside. Swimming’s about the only thing you can do when you’re bored, and you can find food *and* make money if you catch fish. This is nothing.”

Immediately, the girls next to Lillia leapt into the lake.

“See you in the lake, Lillia.”

“Yay!”

Eventually, only three people were left on the tilting plane. Carlo, who stood holding the tail, and Lillia and Treize, sitting on the fuselage. The rest of the children were all swimming to shore.

“Can you swim, big sis?” asked Carlo.

“I go to a secondary school famous for academics and athletics. For your information, I was offered spots on the swim team *and* the water polo team. Although I didn’t join.”

“I don’t really get it, but as long as you know how to swim. Can I go now?”

“Er, yeah.” Lillia nodded.

Carlo took off his hat and rolled up his sleeves. “Then be careful on the way. I’ll see you on the beach. Oh, and make sure you take off your jackets and your shoes.”

With that, Carlo leapt head-first into the water. He rose to the surface much closer to shore, swimming to the beach in an expert freestyle.

“They’re such energetic kids...” Lillia said, watching him depart, “Well, let’s get going.”

But the moment she looked back at Treize—

He was simply laughing.

“Treize?”

It was an empty laugh. When Lillia called his name, Treize continued hoarsely.

“Hah hah hah...”

“Treize. ...Please don’t tell me you’re about to say, ‘I can’t swim’.”

Treize soon replied, “Lake Ras is freezing cold even in midsummer. Yeah. And there’s really not much in the way of fishing, either. The only way to have fun on the lake is skating on it when it freezes over.”

Lillia understood. She deflated.

“So you can’t.”

“It’s all right!”

“What is?”

“I’ll stay behind. I mean, the water’s not that deep. The nose’ll sink first, so I can just cling to the tail...”

“Don’t be stupid! What happens when even the tail sinks?” she cried. At that very moment, the plane shook and the front of the plane sank completely. The water rose to the heated engines, evaporating loudly on contact. “It’s not going to hold! Treize!”

Treize shook his head uncomfortably. “...I’m a confident marksman and hunter. Once, I got a deer with one shot from 400 meters away. I shared the meat with everyone in the valley. They all said I was amazing.”

“Who asked about that stuff?”

“I also know how to speak Ikstovan, even though it’s not used anymore. Although my old teacher’s the only one who speaks it with me.”

“Who cares about that?! We have to jump, Treize! Swim!”

“That’s a tall order.”

“Do it!”

“Tomorrow? ...Civilized people shouldn’t get into water too deep to stand in.”

“Get a hold of yourself! You at least know what swimming looks like, right? You’ve seen people swim? You know, like a frog! Answer me!”



Treize nodded.

"Good!" Lillia nodded. "You just have to keep your head out of the water and move your arms and legs as much as you can! You won't die as long as you can keep breathing! Okay?"

Treize would not budge. Lillia went over to him and pulled his button-up shirt.

"Take this off!"

A couple of buttons went flying, but she succeeded in pulling the shirt over his head. Once she got the shirt off (leaving a T-shirt), she got to work on unlacing his shoes. Treize remained sitting. Then she took off his boots and socks.

"This, too!"

Lillia unbuckled the belt pack around Treize's waist.

"My gun...I don't really want to lose it."

"Then I'll take it."

Lillia put the belt pack around her own waist. It fell to her hips because it was too big for her.

Then, she took out a handkerchief and tied her hair into a ponytail.

"Let's go! Don't struggle, okay?" she commanded.

"Huh?"

Lillia grabbed Treize by the belt and leapt into the water.

"Whoa!"

"Take a deep breath!"

With a splash, they fell side-first into the lake.

"Pffha!"

"Pfwa!"

They lifted their heads above the water.

"C'mon!" Lillia pounded on Treize's back.

"Damn it! Argh!"

Treize waved his arms and legs desperately. His form was sloppy to put mildly, but being athletic he was at least quick.

"Argh! Pffha! Ack, agh!"

Imitating something between a dog paddle and a breaststroke, he pressed forward. Sometimes his face fell under the surface and he emerged to spit out water.

"Keep going! You can do it! Go!" Lillia cheered, doing a perfect breaststroke behind him.

"Gah! Agh!"

"See? You're doing it!" Lillia cried.

"Hah! Hah!"

Looking just about ready to cry, Treize breathed like a carp begging for food. Lillia could see him clearly.

"Go! Keep at it! You're doing really well!"

Between breaths, Lillia made sure to encourage Treize. And on occasion, she stopped to see if her feet could touch the bottom of the lake.

The shore came closer, little by little. The children who had already made it were watching from the beach.

“Man, they’re slow,” Carlo mumbled, scratching his head.

“Almost there! Come on!”

“Hah! Hah!”

About halfway to the beach—

“Hm?”

They heard something behind them, like a large balloon popping in slow motion. Like air escaping something. Lillia twisted herself around and looked back.

“Oh...”

The massive seaplane, which had been cruising through the air not long ago, was sinking completely. Listing at a full 90 degrees, only the back of the fuselage was visible. But soon even that was sucked into the waves.

The round windows on the side, the open hatch, and the tail. In the span of three seconds the plane disappeared completely.

“Thank you...” she whispered, and turned back toward the shore. The plane was sunk, but Treize was afloat. Lillia followed after him in freestyle.

“Almost there! You can do it!”

“Argh! Hah! Glug! Hah! Gah!”

Crying out a series of half-screams, Treize moved forward.

They were just 20 meters from shore. Lillia stopped and checked underfoot. The tip of her toes brushed against the bottom of the lake.

She swam past Treize in freestyle. By the time she stopped, her feet were solidly on the lakebed. She stood and raised her head completely above the water.

“We can stand now!” she cried, turning. “...Treize?”

There was no one there. The placid lake continued on to the horizon.

“Huh?

For a second, she spotted a fingertip rising to the surface of the lake. It soon disappeared.

“How?”

Treize was drowning in the shallows, where his feet could touch the bottom. Lillia ran as fast as she could. The water was so murky that she could not see below, so she frantically waved her arms under the water.

“Oh!”

Her fingertips brushed against something. But she could not grab ahold of it. She searched the area again, but found nothing.

“Tch!”

Leaning forward, she groped through the water with her right arm. She turned in a circle for five seconds, but she felt nothing.

“Argh...”

Lillia took a deep breath and dove in. The water was so murky she couldn’t see more than 20 centimeters, but she still searched the water with eyes wide open.

A leg. Someone’s right leg suddenly appeared before her and kicked her in the forehead.

Lillia did not miss her chance. Quickly, she grabbed it by the ankle with both hands.

“Gah!”

She broke the surface and searched for land. It was right behind her. With Treize's ankle in her grip, Lillia trudged across the sandy lake toward the shore.

"Seriously. It takes talent to go under when you're this close to shore," Carlo muttered, looking down on Treize on the beach.

Lillia came ashore with her back to the beach. Soon, Treize—pulled by his ankles by Lillia—also emerged. His T-shirt was rolled up to his armpits.

Treize's eyes were closed peacefully, as though he were asleep.

"Argh!"

Lillia dragged him onto the sand with all her might. The water still reached his face. She quickly crouched next to him and turned him the other way, grabbing him under the arms.

"Hah...hah..."

She panted as she sat on the shore, but quickly knelt next to Treize and looked at his face. Carlo and the children gathered around them.

"Treize! Wake up!"

She slapped him. There was a resounding smack. His face shook slightly, but he did not respond.

"Open your eyes."

Smack. Smack. No response.

Carlo squatted on the other side and put his fingers in front of Treize's nostrils and his mouth, then placed his middle finger under his face.

"No good. He's not breathing. His lungs are stopped, too," he said, looking up at Lillia. His voice sounded final.

"No... Treize, you idiot! How could you die so easily?!" Lillia cried, pale.

"Calm down, big sis. He's not gone yet. You just have to give him the kiss-and-chest press to wake him up," Carlo said matter-of-factly.

"What?"

"You breathe air into his lungs through the mouth. Then you press on his chest to force his heart to move. Smart people call it CPR. You know that much, right?"

Immediately, the other children nodded and voiced their agreement.

"I-I know how it works, but I've never tried it. What about you, Carlo?"

"I have, but I can't do it. I'm not strong enough. You're the only one who can save big bro. I'll teach you, okay?"

"A-all right...what do I do?" asked Lillia.

Carlo explained. First, she should tilt Treize's head back with one hand and lift his chin with the other. Lillia did as instructed. Carlo looked into Treize's mouth to check if he hadn't vomited.

"The rest is simple. Pinch his nose, put your mouth over his, and blow as hard as you can. Check to see if his chest is moving."

"O-okay..."

Lillia pinched Treize's nose and looked at his mouth. She froze.

"I'm...supposed to kiss him, right?"

"Duh. That's how every prince wakes up."

“You mean princess?”

“Who cares,” Carlo replied, “You’d better do it quick, or he’s really gonna die.”

“It was supposed to be the forehead...”

“What’re you talking about?”

“Never mind.”

Lillia shut her eyes and took a deep breath.

Then she put her mouth over Treize’s. With her eyes closed tight and her body completely tense, she breathed out deeply twice.

“All right. The air’s in,” Carlo said, checking that Treize’s chest was moving. “Next, press on his chest.”

Carlo groped over Treize’s bare torso and found the center of the chest, above the solar plexus. He tapped the spot with his fist. “Over here. Put your palms here, one over the other, and push. You can’t bend your arms and you have to use all your strength. Enough to break his ribs. On my signal, okay?”

Looking ready to cry, Lillia did as Carlo said. She placed her palms on his chest, one over the other, and pressed down with all her weight at Carlo’s signal.

“Press!”

Treize’s chest seemed to sink far enough for his ribcage to break. Lillia grimaced, wondering if she wasn’t doing more harm, but Carlo continued to give signals, three in two seconds.

“No breaks. Press. Press. Press. Press.”

Lillia desperately followed Carlo’s directions. Ten seconds later,

“All right, that’s 15. Back to the mouth! Hurry!” Carlo urged, excited. Lillia went back to doing mouth-to-mouth.

“Chest again!”

Two deep breaths, followed by more chest compression. Carlo clapped along to the beat.

“Good. You’re doing great. Mouth again.”

More mouth-to-mouth with Treize and compression.

“Mouth.”

“Chest.”

Lillia continued to repeat the process, moving back and forth as Carlo instructed.

After four chest compressions and five kisses—

“Gah!”

Treize shuddered and exhaled.

“Eek!” Lillia swung back before she could perform another chest compression.

“Gah! Koff!”

Treize coughed violently and seized.

“Hah...hah...”

Then he knelt on the beach with his head on the sand, breathing heavily for some time.

Lillia was frozen, having landed on her rear. She stared at Treize.

And she breathed a sigh of relief.

“Hey. You all right, big bro?” Carlo asked, tapping him on the back. Treize panted loudly.

“Koff... I feel sick. My stomach feels heavy... I’m gonna hurl.”

“Then go throw up.”

Carlo managed to help Treize to his feet in spite of his height. Treize staggered into the water, knelt in the shallows, and began to vomit.

The children giggled as Treize emptied his stomach.

“Whoa.”

“He’s puking!”

“I feel bad for him.”

“Too bad. Lunch was really good.”

Carlo returned to Lillia’s side. She was still uncertain.

“Is...is he going to be okay?”

“He wasn’t in there long, and if he’s coughing up all that water, he’ll be fine. Although he’s gonna feel sick for a while. Good job, big sis. That was great for your first time.”

With her soaked bangs clinging to her forehead and sand covering her cheeks, Lillia looked up at Carlo. “Thank you...thank you, Carlo. If not for you...”

“This one’s on the house. I’m charging for the next time, okay?”

The moment Lillia stood, the handkerchief tying her hair came loose. Her long hair flopped down and stuck to the back of her wet shirt.

Treize had taken off his T-shirt as he stood with his feet in the water. He had wrung it out and was wiping his face with it. Lillia began walking over to him. Carlo followed.

She stood behind him, to his left, and asked, “Are you okay, Treize?”

“Huh? Oh, er...yeah. The inside of my mouth stings a little, though,” he said, turning to Lillia with a smile. His hair was soaked and stuck to his face.

Because he had taken off his T-shirt, Lillia’s eyes were immediately drawn to his well-defined abs and lean but toned chest.

“Oh...er... That’s good to hear,” she replied, looking away with her face flushed.

“I was drowning back there, wasn’t I?” Treize asked.

“Yeah,” Lillia answered, “You were doing fine until we were this close to shore. I dragged you out of there.”

“I see. Thank you, Lillia. Man, I don’t believe this... I’m ashamed of myself,” Treize mumbled. He was almost pitiful to look at.

“As long as you made it out in one piece, you know?” Lillia said, trying to cheer him up.

“True. But I really thought I was going to die back there. I was sinking, and by that point it was dark and I couldn’t hear anything, I dreamt that someone was beating me up. It hurt so much that I woke up, and I was on the beach.”

“You don’t remember?”

“Remember what?”

“No, well... I see. You were unconscious, I mean. It’s all good. I’m glad you’re safe,” said Lillia.

Carlo finally chimed in. “You’d better seriously thank big sis. She was so desperate, you know? You know how many times she ki-mmph!”

Lillia quickly covered his mouth and knelt down next to him. “He doesn’t need to remember!”

Carlo made a face, but when Lillia took her hand off his mouth, he shrugged. "All right. I guess we can just leave it at that."

He let them be, walking over to the children who were throwing sand at one another on the beach.

Lillia looked back at the dejected Treize. Suddenly, their eyes met.

She quickly looked away.

"Oh."

That was when she spotted the golden pendant around Treize's neck. It was a golden coin on a thin, glittering golden chain. On the face of the coin was an intricate carving of a hawk with its wings spread.

"Hey, nice pendant."

"Hm? Oh, this." Treize seemed to have only just noticed that his pendant was visible. "This is...kind of a lucky charm. Is it weird for a guy to wear a pendant like this?"

"No. It's really nice. Where'd you get it? Iks?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah."

"Wow, I want one too. Show me where you bought it next time I come visit."

Treize silently looked at her.

"What's wrong? ...I-is it really expensive?" Lillia stammered.

"No."

Smiling, Treize looked down at his chest.

He held up the coin with his left hand and looked at the hawk carved on the face, then let it drop.

"I'll give you one someday, Lillia. I promise."

"Really? That's a promise, okay? Even if it's super-expensive. You can't back out later!"

"Yeah. Don't forget."

"Of course I won't! I'm going to remember this moment forever!" Lillia laughed, and slapped Treize in the back.

There was a resounding smack.

Immediately, a deafening noise shook the air. The black fighter craft was flying low, crossing over the lake from left to right. When Lillia and Treize waved at the plane, its wing flaps moved in response.

The children cheered. Allison's fighter plane changed direction in the distance, this time approaching the beach from the west.

Something dropped from the plane as it flew 100 meters overhead. It was a cylindrical case that looked almost like a baton, suspended under a red-and-white parachute.

It fluttered over their heads and landed in the sand a short distance away.

"It's a communication cylinder," Treize said. The children raced to retrieve the message.

Treize put on his T-shirt again. It was dyed a reddish-brown from the lake water. He walked over to where Lillia and the children were huddled.

"Let me see that for a minute. I just want to take out the letter; you can have the cylinder back," he said to the first child to grab the message, and plucked out the letter before returning the container.

“What’s it say?” Lillia asked as Treize unfolded the paper.

“Remain where you are. The storks will rescue you soon. Good work. -Allison’.”

“Thank goodness,” said Lillia, turning her gaze upwards once more.

The black fighter plane circled the air again, heading toward the beach. This time it sped up and zoomed over the heads of the waving children. Then it banked for a hard turn. The children cheered.

Lillia and Treize followed the plane with their eyes.

The fighter craft climbed higher and higher before disappearing into the sun shining in the west.

Silence returned to the beach.

“I’m exhausted,” Treize mumbled, sitting on the sand, and blankly looked at the sky. The summer sun cast a warm light on his soaked clothes and body.

The children were enjoying themselves, some napping on the beach and others sitting in circles to chat. Some of the more energetic ones were swimming in the lake.

“How are you, Treize? Feeling better now?” Lillia asked as she sat down next to him.

“Yeah. I’m not feeling queasy anymore, at least. Now...I’m just hungry.”

“Hah hah. Then I guess you’re all right. I’m really glad. And here you go.” Lillia held out his belt pack.

Treize took it. “Thank you.”

That was when their ears caught the children’s voices.

“Isn’t the Master incredible?”

“Why?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Think about it. He crashed that big aeroplane into the water just so we could have a good time!”

The children gasped and nodded.

“Hah hah!” Treize barked.

Lillia put on a wry grin. “This is great. Let’s just play along with that if the kids ask any questions.”

“I’m sure that’ll put Mr. Morseau at ease, too.”

“Yeah. We all got out of that safely.”

“It’s all thanks to you, Treize. Good job.”

“It was nothing.”

One of the girls called Lillia over.

“Hm? I’ll be right there.” Lillia stood and left Treize’s side with a light wave.

Once she was gone,

“That’s the first time she said, ‘good job’ to me,” Treize muttered to himself. Then he frowned. “In any case...who in the world could have come up with that plan and convinced the captain and the other pilots? And how could they have bought out even the seaplane’s crew?”

As he lost himself in thought, he saw little specks in the eastern sky.

“Oh well. I’ll look into it later.”

The specks grew larger and larger, eventually becoming mid-sized seaplanes. They were about 15 meters from nose to tail, with propellers on the front and back of the engine that was affixed atop the fuselage. They were all marked with the crest of the Roxchean military, and the unit's symbol—a stylized stork—was painted on the fins.

The four identical seaplanes landed in the water one after another, avoiding the rocks.

Rubber boats then emerged from the seaplanes and headed for the beach. Each of the four boats were occupied by soldiers in work wear. They beached the boats on the shore.

“Snack time, kids!”

As the soldiers landed, they began handing out cookies and bottled juice to the awestruck children. And within seconds the boats were surrounded by cheering boys and girls.

Then, a man about 30 years of age wearing a black-and-red Confederation Air Force uniform, with his badge of rank identifying him as a first lieutenant, saluted Lillia and Treize.

“You must be Mr. Treize and Miss Lillia. I’ve come to get you on Captain Schultz’s orders. We’ll be taking the two of you to Bren, and the children to Healer Village.”

“Thank you.” “We appreciate your help,” Lillia and Treize replied.

“Then I’d like to ask you to board the boat now. We’ll set off as soon as you’re on the seaplane,” said the first lieutenant.

“Before that...could we say goodbye to the kids?” asked Lillia.

“Of course.” The first lieutenant smiled.

Lillia thanked him and ran over to the children, who looked like they were enjoying a picnic.

Immediately, the first lieutenant walked over to Treize. With his back turned to him the first lieutenant whispered, “Sir. The Roxchean military’s intelligence department is working to resolve today’s incident. Please leave the rest to us.”

“I knew it.” Treize’s gaze narrowed. “So that’s how Allison arrived so quickly. There were people behind the scenes who knew what was going on. And by ‘leave the rest to us’ you mean, ‘keep you nose out of this business.’ Am I right?”

The first lieutenant’s gaze was fixed ahead.

“We would be grateful if you took it that way, yes.”

“When will you make the official announcement?”

“The crew of the seaplane will be officially tried and punished. And as for the rest...”

“You’ll make it so that nothing ever happened.”

“That is the best choice for the people involved. Like you, Miss Lillia, and Captain Schultz.”

“So a lie is a tool of sorts too, huh. ...But what about us? The people who got plenty involved in this mess? Are you going to keep us in the dark, too? Will we ever know the truth?”

The first lieutenant was expressionless and silent.

“Heh... I understand.” Treize sighed. “I’m going to say goodbye to the kids, too.”

“Be my guest,” the first lieutenant said with a smile.

“Seriously? You’re both leaving already?” Carlo pouted, holding a cookie in each hand.

Lillia squatted next to him to say goodbye. “I’m sorry, Carlo. We’re not from here, so we have to go separately now. I’ll write to you once I get back to the Capital District. So study hard

with the others when you get back to the facility. Then you'll be able to make lots more money once you're an adult."

"If you say so. ...I mean, I wasn't even gonna tell you guys my name at first anyway. Parting is a part of life."

"Look at you, acting all mature. You should try the cutesy act sometimes," Treize chuckled.

Carlo stared up at him without a word. Then, he stuffed both cookies into his mouth and swallowed them. "Big bro. I need to talk to you. C'mere for a minute," he said, dragging Treize away.

"What?"

"Shut up and follow me."

As Carlo pulled Treize along, Lillia wondered to herself, "Hm? Is this what boys' friendships are like?"

"Hey Carlo, isn't this far enough?" Treize complained, once they were about five meters from the other children. Carlo finally came to a stop.

"Hey!" Carlo turned and shot Treize a glare. "You know, don't you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb!" Carlo shot back, punching Treize in the gut.

Treize looked unperturbed. "What, that you're actually Carla?"

"Ack! I knew it! ...How? How did you know?" Carlo demanded.

"I had a feeling from the moment I first spotted you. But I wasn't completely sure until I saw you staring at Lillia's hair. You looked really envious."

"Tch! Long hair doesn't look good on me anyway," Carlo said, scratching her sandy, wet hair with an embarrassed look.

"I won't tell Lillia."

"Really?"

"I promise."

"Y-you'd better! Next time I see her, I'm gonna surprise her with long, pretty hair!"

Treize burst into laughter. "Hah hah hah! It'll look good on you. I'm sure Lillia's going to be floored."

"...Then we're good. Not a word, okay? Don't tell her that I'm a girl! This is a man-to-man promise!"

"That doesn't quite make sense."

"Shut up! Who cares? I'm just saying man-to-man to make things easier. Cause right now, I'm Carlo!"

"All right, all right. This is a man-to-man promise between Carlo and Treize. I promise I'll take your secret to the grave if necessary. I won't tell," Treize declared, placing his left hand in a fist over his chest. Then he slowly knelt in front of Carlo and met her gaze. "Then let me tell you my secret, too. I'm actually a prince. You can't tell Lillia, okay?" he said with a wink, "But I don't have much time left. I have to make a very important decision before I turn 20. This is actually the last chance I'll have to spend time with Lillia like this."

"Wow...that's great!" Carlo grinned.

“What?”

“It’s awesome! That’s definitely gonna win her over. It’s a fun story, and you sound so cool when you’re saying it! It’s really good.”

Treize was at a loss.

“Oh, right. … Yeah. I’ll try it out sometime if I get the chance.”

“Sometime? C’mon, you gotta tell her tonight! *Tonight!* You gotta catch opportunity when it strikes. It doesn’t come every day, you know!” Carlo snickered, poking Treize in the chest. “But if you can’t manage to win her over, I’ll take you. You’re a pretty good guy, big bro!” Carlo beamed.

“I see. … Thank you,” Treize said with a complicated expression, “I’d better get going. You guys go with the soldiers after snack time—they’ll take you to the Master and the matrons at the facility. They’ll be worried that you’ve all been gone so long.”

“All right. I’ll pay attention and be a good kid. But I’m not gonna wear a skirt.”

“Hah hah hah.” Treize stood and began to walk with Carlo. “And about what Lillia and I did on the seaplane… I know the other kids didn’t see anything, but—”

“I know. It’s a secret, right? I’ll keep it safe.”

“Thanks.”

Lillia was waiting for them to return.

“Finished talking? Let’s go.”

Treize nodded. Lillia squatted in front of Carlo and gently embraced her tiny frame.

“Bye, Carlo. I’m so glad we met you.”

Carlo raised her arms and hugged Lillia’s head.

“See you, big sis.”

“Yeah. Take care, okay?”

“You too.”

“Yeah.”

Lillia pulled away from Carlo and stood. Then with a light wave, she turned and walked over to the first lieutenant by one of the rubber boats.

Treize leaned in toward Carlo’s ear and whispered, “Goodbye, Carla.”

Carlo whispered back, “Goodbye, Prince Treize.”

Then,

“See you, Carlo!”

“See you, big bro!”

They exchanged smiles and loudly said their goodbyes.

Chapter 9: And so the two...

The setting sun shone over a dense forest, where a single road stretched on in a straight line.

A bus was parked on the side of the road. Inside were several people dressed for a fishing trip.

Across the road was a black fighter craft. It stood quietly there, with the landing gear underneath and the nose pointed upwards.

One of the men on the bus went over to the blond woman leaning against the plane, who wore a flight suit. The man was wearing glasses.

It was Major Travas and Allison.

"Sorry for putting you through all that."

"Yeah. It was rough."

Beneath his glasses, Major Travas's eyes were narrowed. "Thank you, Allison. We couldn't have done it without you."

"There's no need to thank me," Allison grinned.

Major Travas looked up at the fighter plane, its propellers still as it stood like a sculpture. "So this is one of Roxche's latest fighter crafts."

"Cool, isn't she? Really fast, this one. Although Sou Be-II's tech is still ahead of ours."

"What are you going to do now?"

"I pulled so many crazy maneuvers that I ran out of fuel on the way here. An aeroplane packed with people from the base is going to get here soon, so I'm going to take a break and wait until then. I'll watch the moon on the way back."

"All right, then. I have to go now; we still have work to do."

"Looks like you do."

A brown-haired woman came up behind Major Travas. It was Axe.

"Major. We should be leaving now."

Major Travas glanced at her. "Ah, let me introduce you, Axe. This is Captain Allison Schultz of the Confederation Air Force. She's helped us out before and knows about us. Commit this part to memory. You are free to introduce yourself by your real name."

"Good afternoon," Allison smiled, speaking in Bezelese.

Axe seemed taken aback, but replied in Roxchean, "It's a pleasure to meet you. Gratz Axentine." It was a typical military greeting, minus the salute.

Allison switched to Roxchean. "It's nice to meet you, Axentine."

Though Allison was constantly smiling, Axe remained cool and businesslike. "If you would be quick, Major."

"Understood. Inform the others that I will be there shortly. Begin preparations."

Allison watched Axe walk back to the bus. "Her, too?"

Major Travas nodded. "Yes. A student of the Aikashia school. An excellent one."

"Huh. She sure is pretty," Allison mumbled, and looked Major Travas in the eye. "The question is, is she pretty enough for a certain someone to be cheating on his girlfriend for?"

"What? No, no. I wouldn't," Major Travas replied, flustered. Allison narrowed her eyes.

"Of course not. I mean, I wouldn't want to lay a one-man siege on the embassy with this baby here," she threatened, tapping the fuselage. It rang loudly.

"Scary." Major Travas chuckled. "Anyway, we have to be going. The real work's just ahead for us—or the cleanup, if you look at it another way."

"All right. Let's have dinner together sometime. You owe me for today."

"Sure. I'll see you later," Major Travas said, and turned back to the bus.

"Say." Allison suddenly stopped him.

"Hm?"

Major Travas stopped, but did not turn. Allison stared with her eyes narrowed and asked quietly,

"Is 'Gratz' a common family name in Sou Be-II?"

"No," Major Travas replied immediately.

Allison shrugged. "I knew it."

The conversation came to an end.

Allison watched as Travas departed.

* * *

Twilight was coming to the little cabin in the forest.

The sky was losing its blue tint, and a golden light was cast on the clouds high in the air.

Inside the cabin sat Morseau, absorbed in a book. The interior quickly grew dark.

Morseau put a bookmark on his page, put the book on the table, and stood.

He picked up the kettle in the kitchen and poured lukewarm water into a cup. He slowly drank it on the spot.

Putting the cup down, he reached behind a piece of plywood hanging from the wall. Then he slowly reached for the thin black knife hidden there. His fingers were mere centimeters from the knife—

"Freeze!"

Four men kicked down the door and leapt inside. Not only were they dressed in camouflage gear, paint was slathered on their faces and their hats were covered with leaves. As soon as they were inside, the men scattered to the corners of the house and pointed their small machine guns at Morseau.

"One wrong move, and we'll open fire," one of the men said tersely from behind Morseau. Morseau froze.

One of the men grabbed him by the collar and forced him down to the floor. Then he pulled back Morseau's arms and tied them together with string from his pocket.

"Hah. Such violent visitors. I don't think this is any mood for a tea party. You're nothing like the guests I greeted earlier," Morseau said calmly as he lay on the floor.

"You're coming with us," one of the men commanded.

The men in camouflage gear put a cloth bag over Morseau's head and took him into custody. They left the cabin and pushed the old man into the black van parked outside. It was the very same vehicle that had picked up the group of supposed reporters outside Healer Village.

The van tumbled down the road with the five men inside. Away from the village—eastward, where there was nothing but trees.

The men said nothing. Neither did Morseau. He sat silently between the intruders, cramped in his seat with his hands tied behind his back.

The forest seemed for all the world like a pair of black walls lining the road. The sky alone retained a hint of light. The van continued quickly in the darkness. Each time they hit a puddle in the way, the driver expertly operated the wheel as mud splashed outside.

And just as the man in the passenger seat glanced at his watch,
“Whoa!”

The driver flinched and hit the brakes.

There was someone ahead, crossing the middle of the road. He was a well-built man in his forties, wearing a hat and dressed for a fishing trip. Slung over his shoulder was a fishing bag and in his left hand was a bucket.

There was no shock or fear in his eyes as he looked at the car. The only thing visible under his hat was a blank expression. Suddenly, the bucket fell from his hand.

The empty bucket hit the road, then bounced up. And before it hit the ground again, the fisherman pulled his bag in front of him and took out its contents.

A shotgun emerged. The man held it at the van as it barreled toward him. And he pulled the trigger.

The front-left tire burst. The van, already slowing, decelerated almost instantly as its bumper ground against the mud. It soon came to a stop on the left side of the road as though tripping forward.

The man with the shotgun pulled the pump handle to expel the empty shell, then loaded the next one and took aim at the van again. His movements were calculating and businesslike, and his face showed no sign of emotion.

“Shit!” “What’s going on?!” the driver and the man in the passenger seat yelled.

The two men in the back seat took up their submachine guns and opened the doors. Then they quickly stepped outside and took aim at the man on the road, using the doors as shields. However—

“Don’t even bother.”

The men found themselves being held at gunpoint from behind. Two men dressed in fishing gear had emerged from the woods, holding large handguns to their heads.

The two men in camouflage gear seethed as they put down their submachine guns, glaring at the muzzles pointed at their heads. The driver and the man next to him put their feet on the hood to indicate surrender.

The two fishermen who emerged from the woods forced the men in camouflage gear to the ground. They made sure to restrain their hands backwards and cross their legs so it would be difficult for the men to stand. Then, two more men emerged with shotguns in hand and expertly tied up the four fallen men.

In less than 10 seconds, the van had been taken and the four men in camouflage gear were left on the ground.

“Finished,” said a fisherman holding a shotgun. He was speaking in Roxchean. Taking aim with his right hand, he took out slugs from his vest pocket and loaded them with his left.

A young woman carrying a mid-sized handgun emerged from the brush and approached the van. She checked the back seat through the wide-open doors and carefully removed the bag from over the old man's head. Morseau calmly looked at the woman.

"Well, this is a surprise. What is going on here, Miss?"

The woman's reply was emotionless. "We're here to rescue you. If you would step outside."

She was speaking Bezelese.

Morseau's expression shifted. As his eyes widened in shock, the woman pulled him out.

"You..." one of the men on the ground growled resentfully.

"My apologies," said a voice, emerging from the woods. It was Major Travas. Holding a handgun, he squatted next to the men in camouflage gear. "We'll be taking him now."

"You're... 'Aristocrat', aren't you?" the man spat.

Major Travas did not reply.

"Don't play dumb. Why are you turning against us *now*?" the man demanded, raising his head. He found a shotgun muzzle pointed at his face. But Major Travas waved the gun aside.

"We're not turning against you. This was our plan from the very beginning. Thank you for your efforts, 'Treefrogs'. Or I suppose I should call you the Roxche Special Forces. Leave the rest to us."

Leaving the man dumbstruck, Major Travas went over to Morseau. The woman had untied him and was massaging his numb wrists.

"It looks like you had a difficult time," Major Travas said with a smile. He was speaking Bezelese.

"Who in the world...?" Morseau asked in Roxchean.

Major Travas replied in Roxchean as well. "Isn't it nostalgic, speaking in your mother tongue again? Although I suppose you'll be hearing much more of it soon."

"Th-then—"

So shocked was Morseau that he could not continue.

Major Travas nodded firmly. "Yes. We will be sending you back to Sou Be-II—back home. That is why we are here. You can rest easy with us."

"Ah..."

Morseau closed his eyes. A tear ran down his cheek.

The sun set completely and the sky turned orange, then indigo.

In the woods, where darkness fell before moonrise, sat a van driven into the dirt with one of its tires punctured. Next to it lay four men in camouflage gear, their arms and legs all bound.

There was no one else around. They could not hear any vehicles. Only the cries of the birds in the trees seemed to resound through the forest.

"Mountain fowl, do you think?" asked one of the men, still lying face-down on the ground.

"You're actually enjoying this, aren't you?" replied another. The men burst into laughter.

"Can we stop kissing dirt now?"

"Yes. To your feet."

The men flipped themselves around to face the sky. Then, with their hands still tied behind their backs, they began to untie the ropes on the hands of the men next to them.

Soon, the four men rose to their feet and picked up their submachine guns. The magazines were empty. The group that had restrained them had taken all the rounds.

“Looks like we’ll be getting an earful from the old man at the armory again.”

“Stop complaining. This was a planned expense.”

The men chattered, relaxed as could be, and gathered up the ropes and even the torn pieces of the exploded tire.

The man who went over to the front of the van examined the front-left wheel, which with the exception of the tire was completely unscathed.

“He’s a great shot, that one. Taking out just the tire with one round? Even I couldn’t do that.”

“If things hadn’t changed, we’d be facing monsters like that on the battlefield.”

“Scary. But the lady was a looker.”

“Can’t believe you had the guts to check her out. I was busy being scared that they’d actually shoot.”

“Ask her out next time if you see her at the Capital District, Sergeant Major.”

“No thank you, sir. A woman that scary just might castrate me if I got on her nerves.”

The men had a hearty laugh over the sergeant major’s comment. Then,

“Well, Treefrogs, the mission is over. With just one popped tire and a few lost magazines, thank the gods. We’ll switch out and withdraw.”

Soon, the men disappeared and left nothing behind.

* * *

It was at the end of that summer evening that the rescue seaplane carrying Lillia and Treize landed near Bren. The sun had already set, and the sky over the lake was glowing a brilliant orange.

Lillia and Treize had both changed into tracksuits given them by the soldiers on the plane. The words ‘Air Force’ were embroidered over the chest. They wore flat sandals on their feet. Their wet clothes were inside a waterproof bag labelled ‘body bag’ in tiny letters, carried by Treize.

A medical officer had given Treize a checkup on the plane. Lillia breathed a sigh of relief when Treize was declared unhurt.

Then, they had explained everything that had happened since they boarded Mateo’s tour plane. Afterwards the first lieutenant explained several things to them.

That the children were on their way back to the facility, and the villagers were informed that the seaplane had run aground due to pilot error. That the Tolcasian pilots who took part in the plot, excluding the dead captain and including the one who had shot Mateo, had been arrested. That a trustworthy team was already investigating the case to find the mastermind. That the employees of the Lartika tour plane company were informed that their two customers were safe.

"We won't be bothering you any more after today. Because the man who shot Mr. Mateo is a soldier, he will be courtmartialed behind closed doors. Once we have a verdict, we will give you a brief summary of everything we are permitted to reveal."

Treize listened skeptically. He knew that the military would be permitted to reveal nothing, which meant that they would not be giving any reports—and even if they did, the report would be a completely fictitious one.

"Thank you, First Lieutenant. We're counting on you."

But when Lillia replied, Treize looked at her and said nothing.

The town of Bren was filled with lights from street lamps and houses. Lillia and Treize disembarked at a pier in the harbor.

The first lieutenant took them by car into town. A short drive later, they arrived at a hotel. It was not as luxurious as the one in Lartika, but it was also quite large and looked expensive.

"We've contacted the hotel in Lartika ahead of time and brought your belongings here. Along with Miss Lillia's souvenirs," the first lieutenant explained.

He had led them, not through the front doors, but the back. They left their wet clothes with the laundromat service and took the elevator.

Lillia and Treize were given two large single rooms.

"I'm not the one who prepared your rooms. I'm sure you both must have a lot on your minds, but we'd like for you to rest here for tonight. And there's no need to worry about the hotel expenses, including the meals. Take your time and relax. And starting tomorrow, please continue your trip as if nothing happened," the first lieutenant said, and disappeared into the elevator.

"Is he making fun of us?" Treize grumbled.

Afterwards, Lillia and Treize went to their own rooms and spent a long time washing out the mud and sand in their showers.

About an hour later, Treize called Lillia's room and asked if she wanted to get dinner. Lillia stepped out in the same clothes as the first day. Treize was in his usual outfit. They headed for the restaurant on the top floor together.

The world outside was tinted a bluish white under the moon, and candles lit the restaurant interior. Completely ignoring the other patrons in their fancy clothes, Lillia and Treize ordered one expensive dish after another and wolfed them down.

"If we're not paying for ourselves, might as well go all-out."

"Yeah. I'm starving."

They cleaned off their plates with very few words between them, and by the time they had finished several different desserts, there were no other patrons in the restaurant.

Lillia picked up her teacup.

"That was great. I'm really sleepy now. We went through so much today..."

"Agreed. Today *and* yesterday. We only set off three days ago, but this trip is turning out to be an exhausting one."

"Let's get some sleep. We'll think about tomorrow tomorrow."

"Yeah."

"Anyway, you really helped out a lot today, Treize. Thank you."

"Not at all. I just wish I didn't end up looking so bad at the end there..." Treize trailed off. Lillia gave him an encouraging look.

"Who cares? I mean, I got the chance to pay you back."

"All right." Treize nodded. Then, "Come to think of it, you were supposed to give me that prize. Don't tell me you forgot."

Lillia stared. Treize was smiling like a kid in a candy store.

"Not anymore," she replied tersely.

"Hmph. ... Wait, what do you mean, 'anymore'?"

"That's not important."

Finishing her tea, Lillia cupped her hand over her mouth as she yawned loudly.

"Yeah. I think I'll sleep like a rock tonight."

"Let's get going. Should I wake you up for breakfast tomorrow?"

"Yes please. We'll stuff ourselves tomorrow, too."

Finally, they stood. Treize signed the bill that the waiter brought.

Once they stepped onto the elevator, Lillia asked, "How much was it?"

"You're better off not knowing."

They disembarked, walked down the hall, and stopped in front of Lillia's room.

"See you tomorrow, then. You don't want to switch rooms this time?" asked Treize.

"I don't have the energy. And we're not in Lartika anyway, so I don't really care about the view."

"All right," Treize replied, pointing at his own room. "I'll be in there."

"Too bad we're not using the same suite this time. Good night," Lillia said, disappearing into her room.

"Good night," Treize replied with a wry smile, taking her comment as sarcasm.

The doors closed, and the hall was deserted.

"What the heck did I just say...?"

Lillia leaned against her door, blushing furiously, and writhed in embarrassment as she punched herself in the head.

"Stupid! Idiot! Imbecile!"

* * *

"It's finally over..."

Once he was in his room, Treize placed his handgun on the table.

The gun had been submerged, and was covered in sand. He took it apart and cleaned out the parts, oiled it, then reassembled it. Then he loaded the extra magazine and ammunition he had locked in his luggage.

"I should get to bed..."

When he turned off the table lamp, the room instantly dimmed. Pale blue moonlight seeped in between the curtains.

But the moment Treize stood, the phone at the end of the table began to ring.

“Whoa!”

Flinching, he reflexively picked up the receiver.
And, looking around, he slowly brought it to his ear.
“Hello? Who is this?”

From the phone came a man’s voice.
<Good evening, owner of the hawk pendant.>

“... You? ... Why?” Treize asked, having an idea about the voice. His voice instantly fell to a whisper, though no one could have possibly overheard him anyway.

<You see—> the man began.

“Oh! I get it!” Treize cut him off. “You’re part of this—you’re *also* part of this, aren’t you?”

<The moon is beautiful tonight,> the man replied, <Would you like to join me for a drive?>

Treize put on a leather jacket over his T-shirt and stuffed his wallet and his handgun into his pockets.

Then he put on his boots and left his room.

Treize glanced at Lillia’s room as he stepped into the elevator.

Crossing the first floor lobby, he left through the rotating doors. A car was parked outside in the moonlight.

It was a black sedan, the type commonly used as taxis. In the driver’s seat on the left side was a bespectacled man dressed for a fishing trip.

“Good evening,” the man said, opening the window.

Treize accepted the man’s offer and sat in the passenger seat next to him. Then, checking that no one else was in the car, he greeted the man. “Good evening.”

“Let’s take a quick drive through the area,” said the man in the driver’s seat, starting the car. They left the hotel roundabout and drove into the paved road lined with street lamps. The man drove carefully, keeping a steady pace and making no sudden turns.

“So no one could possibly overhear us in a moving car, is that it? Major Travas?”

“That’s the idea, Your Highness.”

They drove at a relaxed pace through the town, towards the harbor. Before the harbor was a single road leading north. To the left was the lake and to the right was an orchard lined with small trees. There were no other vehicles in sight.

Major Travas slowed down and switched to a lower gear. He continued at a slower speed.

“We received word about your boarding the seaplane immediately after it took off. We could have stopped you if we’d known sooner. It’s a miracle you made it out alive. I’m very impressed.”

“It was a piece of cake,” Treize replied. Major Travas grinned.

“But in reality?”

“I thought we were goners. Really, I did.”

“Hah hah hah.” Major Travas chuckled, his eyes narrowing. But Treize frowned.

“To be honest, there’s still so much about the incident that confuses me, even though we were involved in it. And the first lieutenant from the Roxchean military outright told me not to poke my nose into this.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“But I think it’d chase away my sleep if you were to tell me, Major.”

“And why do you suppose I would tell you?” asked Major Travas, sounding like a teacher.

Treize replied immediately, “Because if you’re here, there is no way that you have no relation to this case. And if you had no intention of telling me the truth, you wouldn’t have called me out in the first place.”

“A simple answer.”

“Then will you tell me?”

“Is that an order from His Highness Prince Treize of Ikstova?” asked Major Travas.

Treize furrowed his brow, but when he glimpsed Major Travas’s profiled face and the amused smile on it, he understood.

“Oh! Yes. This is an order from the prince.”

“That is quite troubling. I have no choice but to obey the prince’s command. Now, the topic of our discussion being what it is, I ask your understanding if I happen to accidentally let a few national secrets slip,” Major Travas said, not looking guilty in the least, “The ones behind this incident—in other words, the ones behind the plan to crash a plane full of orphans—were not the Tolcasian pilots. They were won over, or perhaps manipulated by the real mastermind.”

“Yes. I could see that much.”

“The one who attempted to turn the charity flight into a tragedy...”

Treize waited, holding his breath.

“...Was the man who planned the charity flight.”

“What?” Treize exclaimed.

Major Travas repeated himself. “The man who planned the charity flight.”

“...Mr. Morseau, you mean?”

The major glanced at Treize with a nod. “Yes.”

“He planned this alone?” Treize asked immediately.

“Yes.”

“Is the Roxchean intelligence department after him?”

“Yes.”

“And are you and the Sou Be-II intelligence department after him as well?”

“Yes.”

“Is he—is Mr. Morseau...a Sou Be-II spy?”

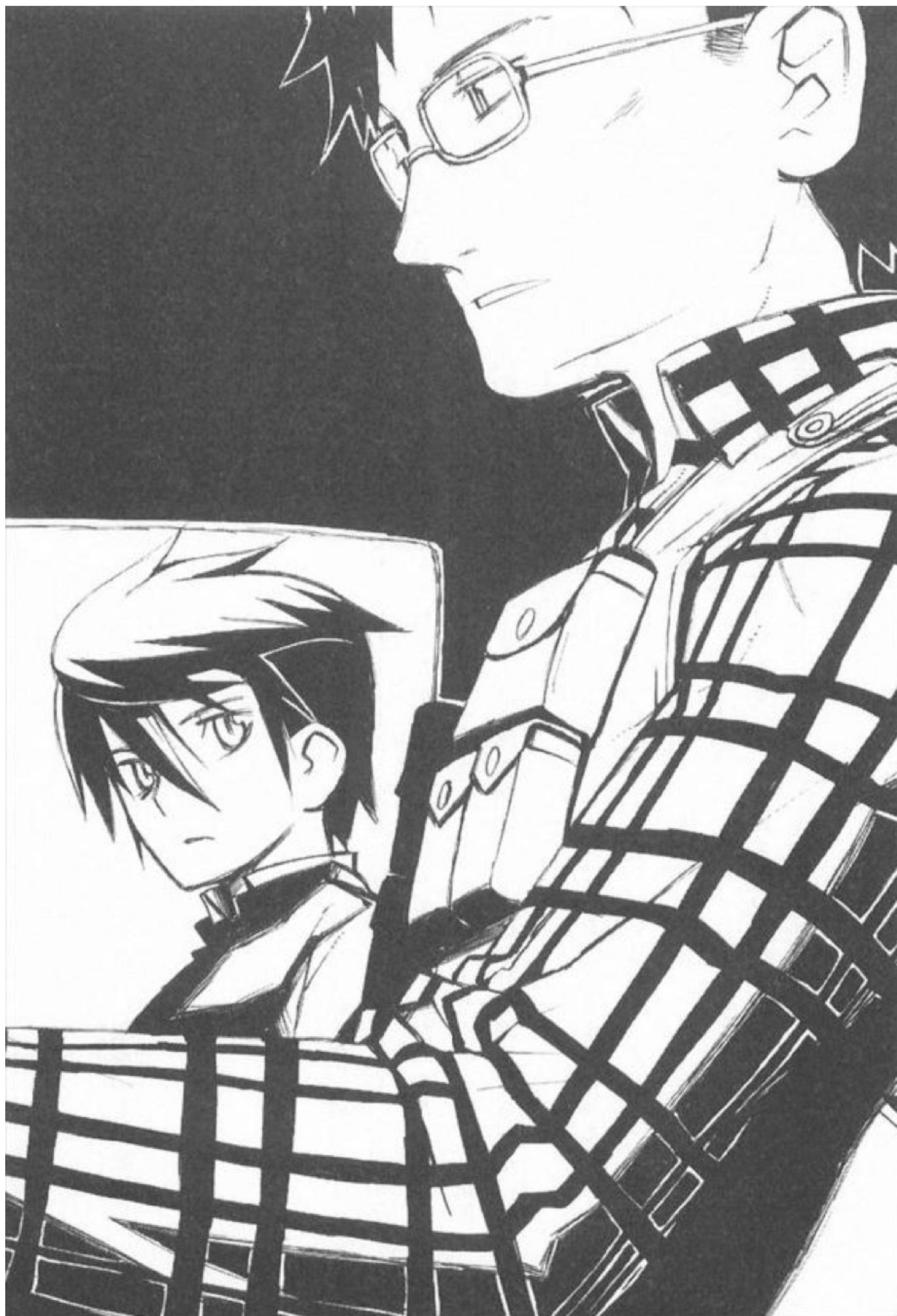
“The answer is ‘yes’.”

Treize did not say a word.

“Any other questions?”

“Why?”

“Why do you think?” Major Travas asked, rather than answer immediately.



Treize stared at the dashboard for a full 10 seconds, deep in thought. "I don't know. Mr. Morseau runs an orphanage in Tolcasia and has for a long time. The people here love him. I don't think any of that was falsified or exaggerated. But why would a Sou Be-II spy do such a thing? And why would he want to suddenly kill all the children?" Treize muttered, shaking his head again and again. And he looked at Major Travas.

"You don't know, you say," replied the major. A smile rose to his face. "That is the answer. There is no way for you to know the truth at this point in time. For that, you would first need information on who Morseau is and what he has been doing over these years."

"Please tell me," Treize asked immediately. There was a hint of sadness in Major Travas's eyes as he glanced at him.

"I must warn you beforehand, Your Highness, that the truth will disgust you. You may even think it was best that you never asked. ...Do you still want me to continue?"

"...Yes."

"Then let me explain. First, about the man known as Ein Morseau. He was born about 60 years ago in a poor mining village in Sou Be-II. Naturally, 'Morseau' is a pseudonym. Not long after he was born, his father was killed in a cave-in and his mother went missing. He grew up an impoverished orphan and had a difficult childhood. When he learned that Sou Be-II was engaged in the fierce battles of the Great War, he entered the Royal Army claiming to be older than he was. Though he was never deployed, he grew into an accomplished soldier with excellent academic achievements. Afterwards, he was selected to be part of the intelligence department and became one of their operatives. Any questions so far?" Major Travas said, his recitation civil and expert.

Treize replied that he had nothing to ask.

"Then let me continue. For some time he worked internally in Sou Be-II. And about 30 years ago, an incredible plan was formulated and he was chosen to carry it out."

"He had to sneak into Roxche to do something, right?"

"That's correct, Your Highness. Has anyone ever told you about Allison's father, Aikashia Cross?"

"Mother and Father told me about the events surrounding their betrothal oath. They also told me that, during the war, spies were dispatched to opposing nations for espionage and sabotage."

"Indeed. Mr. Morseau was given one such mission. He illegally entered Roxche and got his hands on a fake citizenship."

"Then...did he abandon his mission? According to the villagers, that's about when he started the orphanage at Healer Village," Treize asked.

Major Travas shook his head. "That was his mission. He would gather orphans and educate them in Tolcasia, which was even then a poor country. He would raise them to work in the Capital District."

"...I don't understand. How does that help Sou Be-II during the war?"

"Morseau's actions were in themselves a great help to Tolcasia and its people. Which is why the citizens call him 'Master' out of respect. But that was all a part of his plans."

"I suppose he must have been using the orphanage as a cover for something sinister."

"That's correct."

"Like what?" asked Treize. But Major Travas did not answer, instead changing the topic.

"In this world...there are people with interests that defy common sense and morality."

"Well, wherever there are people, there are weirdos," Treize replied, a little surprised at the change of subject.

"Legally permissible interests, at least, end at worst with the person being ostracized by society. But what if the interest in question happens to be illegal? Then the person with the interest has two options. Give up on it because it is illegal, or do it in secret because it is illegal."

"I see."

"And if the person happens to be powerful—especially in the financial sense—they will often choose the latter. They use money to get what they want. ...For example, living children."

"What? You mean—" Treize's face darkened in an instant.

"Yes. I did warn you that you would be disgusted, Your Highness."

Treize was stunned into silence.

"Morseau sent the orphans to the Capital District. Many of them found work and live there to this day. But many others are no longer of this world."

"Human trafficking..."

"Indeed. Those children were sold to rich patrons in the Capital District and met cruel and terrible ends."

"...Damn it..." Treize swore, clenching his fists. "They said that a lot of kids forget the Master's kindness and break off contact with the facility. So that was why," he muttered and hung his head. Major Travas continued.

"That was Morseau's true mission. He would gather children with nowhere to go and sell them to people in the Capital District. There are many kinds of rich people. Morseau's clients in particular happened to be particularly powerful. Other than their sick interests, they were assets to their country and people. They worked for the sake of many and made many happy."

Treize raised his head. "So he was gathering blackmail material on them. That was his mission... I get it now."

"Yes. A spy needs informants. Other spies would get in contact with these people of influence and blackmail them with the evidence. Naturally, these patrons would never have realized Morseau's true identity, or the fact that they had been caught in a trap. We do not know how much information these people provided Morseau's spies, but the intelligence seemed to have been quite beneficial to Sou Be-II. At least, until the war ended."

"What happened 18 years ago, then, when the armistice was signed?"

"The signing of the armistice did not mean immediate peace between East and West. The foundations of both nations' defenses still remain the same. But the value of information has dropped significantly. It would have been just as well for Morseau's mission to end there."

"But..."

"Though the reasons remain unknown, he continued his mission. In other words, Morseau did not receive orders to stop. This is just a guess, but the military may have decided that he could still be useful in his position. However, not a single spy has contacted him in the past 10 years."

"Was he abandoned, then?"

"Perhaps," Major Travas said, and stopped the car. Making several turns on the narrow, deserted road, he slowly drove back the way they came.

"I understand everything up to that point," said Treize.

Major Travas continued. "Let me explain today's incident, then. Even I do not know why he planned this. Perhaps he became sick of his mission and decided to wash his hands of the child trafficking business by killing the children from the facility. Perhaps he intended to leave and burn his farm behind him, so to speak."

"And you're telling me that people went along with his plan, not realizing the truth."

"Yes. The young officers of Tolcasia, and the rich patrons of the Capital District who provided the money to rent the seaplane and bribe the crew—whether they were blackmailed or paid willingly to destroy evidence. Sou Be-II and Roxche's intelligence departments got wind of the plan almost simultaneously."

Treize nodded several times. "So both sides must have moved to cover up the past. Sou Be-II, to hide the fact that they gave such sickening orders to a spy, and Roxche, to hide the identities of the people who took part in those sick hobbies. You were working together to prevent a scandal from breaking out."

"Correct. The Capital District Police Force had a vague idea about the child trafficking for quite some time. But they could not make any rash moves because the patrons happened to be people of influence. I can't name any names, but even among the police department's superiors—in other words, those in the judicial department—were regular patrons of Morseau's business."

Treize could not say a word.

"You will see such people retire in unusually quick succession very soon. Roxche is not sitting on its hands. There *are* people who scorn such disgusting acts. We must have faith in their abilities."

"I understand that."

Treize was silent for a time; then he spoke again.

"What will happen to the Tolcasian pilots who fell for his plan?"

"They will be courtmartialed—"

"Firing squad?"

"Possibly."

"With certainty," Treize declared.

"Why do you say that?" asked Major Travas.

"Because that's the only way to silence them," Treize replied immediately, "You didn't stop the seaplane from taking off. You didn't stop it, even though you knew all those children were going to die. You watched the plane take off. You were planning to arrest the Tolcasian pilots after the crash and reveal that they were the ones who had shot down the seaplane. At the same time, you would shut down the empty facility and inform the sick bastards in the Capital District that the 'farm' was gone. Once the public found out that the orphans were killed by soldiers from their own country, Tolcasia would indeed get attention. But that was just a side-effect for you. One that didn't matter in the least," he said without pausing.

Major Travas kept his eyes forward as he continued to drive.

"You were going to let that happen, Major Travas. If we didn't happen to be onboard."

"... Yes."

"When you found out that we boarded the plane as well, you quickly contacted Allison and sent her in a fighter craft to protect the seaplane."

"I did. I had to prevent the crash. I quickly altered our plans so that the passengers would be rescued after landing and the plane would be sunk afterwards."

"If we didn't happen to be onboard...you would have killed those children," Treize repeated. Then, "But ultimately, you saved our lives and the children are safe."

Quietly, he glared at Major Travas.

"So...thank you."

They drove back the way they came.

To their right was the lake, the moon reflected on its surface. Beyond shone the tiny lights of Lartika.

Treize watched the scenery pass by and whispered, "That man—Mr. Morseau—he knew."

"What do you mean?" Major Travas turned.

Treize looked him in the eye. "That we—or at least one of us—knew how to fly an aeroplane."

Major Travas was silent.

"There was no way to reach his house other than by aeroplane. He also must have noticed that we were wearing aviator jackets. There's a good chance that he heard about what happened from the Tolcasian pilots before he came to his cabin."

"I see. So he must have known."

"And yet he had us board the seaplane. There were a lot of circumstances involved, but he still had us board a plane that was going to lose its crew and crash after running out of fuel. Until now, I'd thought he did that to erase evidence of Mr. Mateo's death...but maybe...just maybe..."

"I can't say I have an answer to that."

"I'd like to ask him in person, if it were possible," Treize muttered.

Major Travas replied, "He's no longer here, I'm afraid."

Treize turned his gaze to the bluish-white world outside. "Come to think of it, you're right. You must have smuggled him away to take him to Sou Be-II. That's why you—"

He froze.

"No. No...that's not it..."

Slowly, Treize turned. And, with his eyes locked on Major Travas, he voiced his suspicions.

"Before, you didn't deny that Sou Be-II might have abandoned Morseau. Then it doesn't make sense for you to rescue him now. ...You killed him, didn't you, Major Travas? That was your mission—to silence him permanently."

Eyes tinged with sadness, Major Travas looked at Treize. "The person who brings his car back to his cabin will discover his body there. His death will make the news here either tomorrow or the day after. But it won't even make a corner of the papers back in the Capital District."

"Is your mission finished?"

Major Travas nodded. And, downcast, he repeated himself.
“I did warn you that you would be disgusted, Your Highness.”

The harbor and the town were near. Their drive was at an end.

For some time, they sat in silence. But as they left the harbor area, Major Travas finally spoke.

“I might be deemed unnecessary myself someday. And I hope that, when the time comes, as few people as possible despise the government for it.”

“You mean Lillia?” asked Treize.

“Well, among others.” Major Travas smiled, dodging the question. He turned a corner and headed for the hotel.

“If it ever seems like you’re going to lose your job, contact our family,” Treize said. Major Travas looked a little surprised.

“Your parents once said the same thing to me. Word-for-word, in fact.”

“We will welcome you, no matter what position I may be in.”

“I’ll think about it”. That’s what I told them. And that is my answer this time as well.”

“Please consider it.”

Major Travas slowed the car, approaching the hotel roundabout.

“Thank you, Major.”

“It was nothing, Your Highness.”

With that, Major Travas stopped the car at the entrance.

Treize said nothing as he opened the door and disembarked. And with a light wave of the hand, he stepped inside.

Major Travas started the car.

* * *

The next day. It was the fourth morning of the trip.

They were sitting in the hotel restaurant. Lillia was in a similar outfit to the previous day’s, and Treize in the same outfit as before. Between them was a long table.

Their expensive dishes were topped with bacon, toast, eggs, and vegetables—a commonplace but expertly-crafted breakfast. Lillia stabbed a tomato with her fork.

“Is *that* why you brought it along?”

“No, but...” Treize mumbled, shrinking back. “Going through all that stuff made me really think, you know? I mean, the timing worked out, so I thought I should get back home. I’ve actually been thinking about it since last night. I didn’t say anything because it’d be awful to suddenly leave you when I said I’d be your chaperone. But when you said you wanted to go back to the Capital District today...it just kind of worked out.”

Lillia put the tomato in her mouth, chewed, swallowed, and talked as though nothing had happened. “...I see. You’re going in the opposite direction, so you shouldn’t have to come all the way back to the capital again. I can take a sleeper train alone, anyway. And I can catch a taxi so I don’t have to worry about carrying my stuff. I don’t really have any reason to stop you.”

“Sorry for being so selfish.”



"There's nothing to apologize for. What's gotten into you?"

"Thanks for everything, Lillia."

"Hey...did you eat something funny? Not here, I mean somewhere else. You don't sound like yourself," Lillia noted, pointing her fork at Treize.

"Huh? Maybe I'm just tired."

"Did you sleep well last night?"

"Hm? Er...no. I mean, yes."

"Which is it?" Lillia demanded, cutting a piece of bacon with her fork and dropping it into her mouth. "Anyway, we went through a lot of crazy things, but it wasn't all bad."

"Huh. you think so?" Treize asked, spreading butter on a piece of toast.

"Yeah. Like the Master. Mr. Morseau."

Treize froze. A chunk of butter ran down the toast and landed in his scrambled egg.

"I learned that there are good people wherever I go. I was happy to see Lartika in person, but I was even happier to meet Mr. Morseau. I hope he'll be able to give opportunities to more kids like Carlo. It really was an awesome coincidence, running into him. It was the best part of this trip. Don't you think so?"

Treize's eyes caught Lillia's smile. After a moment of silence, he finally opened his mouth.

"Yeah... I guess you could see it that way."

"Hey, are you sure you're okay?"

"Y-yeah. I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" Lillia asked, staring into Treize's rigid face.

He averted his gaze and placed his toast on the plate, picking up a glass of orange juice.

"Never mind," said Lillia, "When's the next time I can see you?"

Treize's hand stopped. He put down the glass, which he was trying to drain in one go.

As Lillia waited for an answer, looking no different from usual, Treize stammered.

"...Er, well... I don't really know yet, but...sometime."

"I see."

"Oh, yeah! You should come over to Iks sometime, Lillia. You're always welcome."

"Later. I'll go with Mom when winter break starts, okay?"

"You're both welcome! I hope I can invite you to my place..."

"That's a good idea. I'll crash at your house next time, then."

"Great. I promise you will."

"It's a promise."

Lillia raised her glass of grapefruit juice. Treize also raised his glass, placing his left hand over his chest.

Soon, there was a clink over the breadbasket.

"I promise."

* * *

"Ah, what a coincidence! It looks like we're on the same train again, Miss," exclaimed the woman who entered the cabin.

Lillia sat alone as she watched the scenery pass by outside. The train had left Bren, and was moving across a field under the blue sky.

Lillia searched through her memories. "Oh! We shared a cabin on the way, didn't we?"

The woman nodded. "That's right. Are you going back alone?" "Hoh hoh. On your way back alone, I see?"

Lillia answered the woman and her husband, who followed her in,

"Yes. I'm going back to the Capital District."

The couple sat side-by-side across from Lillia. The conductor came in to check their tickets and left.

"What about your companion, Miss?" asked the woman.

"He said he had something to do, so he went back home. He's not actually from the Capital District."

The couple seemed a little surprised.

"Oh... I see. I was afraid you'd rejected him, Miss," said the man. Lillia chuckled.

"Hah hah. It's not like that."

"Speaking of which, Miss. Is he your type?" the man asked.

"Oh, Honey. What kind of question are you asking?" the woman scolded him, but Lillia didn't mind.

"My type? I don't really know. But he can be dependable."

"Oh?" "Oh my," the couple replied in unison.

"To be honest, there was a lot about him I didn't like until recently."

"Hm." "Oh dear."

"But I realized that I was just jealous of him. Because he could do the same things I could do. Then it turned out that even he had stuff he wasn't good at... It was kind of cute. I'm glad I realized all this. I'm reflecting on myself for resenting him for such a petty reason."

"I see..." "My..."

"I don't think I'm an attractive person at all. Heh heh... I should try and change myself."

Watching Lillia smile brightly, the couple exchanged glances.

* * *

The Roxcheanuk Confederation was known for its cool summers, owed mostly to the brisk, dry seasonal winds that blew in from the north.

The official name of the confederation's capital on the northeastern part of the continent was the Special Capital District. It was an independent part of the confederation not affiliated with any of its member states. Five-story apartments took up a good chunk of the residential district surrounding the city center and its civic buildings.

And in one room in one particular building,

"I'm back. ...Then again, nobody's here. Oh well. I guess I'll spend the summer relaxing," Lillia Schultz mumbled to herself.

It was early summer, at around noon.

At the same time.

Treize was in a leather jacket. He had arrived at a village bookstore by the street. He parked his motorcycle and stepped inside. He turned to the owner in the aisle. "Do you have any swimming manuals in stock? Something easy enough for anyone to learn."

-And so the Two Left on a Trip (Part 2): End-

Dear Mr. Wilhelm Schultz,

Hello, Wil.
Am I really dead?

If you are reading this and I am not dead, there has been a terrible mistake. Please fold up this letter, place it back in the envelope, and send it back to me or bury it in your suitcase.

Oh, but you might be confused if I just end things here, so please read on a little more.
(Until the end of the first page.)

This letter is the last will and testament of Allison Whittington. Me.

Not long ago, there were a series of aeroplane-related accidents at a certain Confederation Air Force base. Fifteen pilots lost their lives in the span of three days, and it was suggested that measures be taken to lessen the grief of the bereaved in the case of another tragedy.

So the Air Force Command Center has issued an order to every pilot to write a last will and testament, whether they are in combat or not. They say that the command center will keep the letters and send them to the bereaved when the pilot's death has been confirmed.

Some people had wills written even before the accidents, but this time, it is mandatory. Orders are orders. I am no exception, even though I am not part of a combat unit.

Most pilots say that they are writing to their family, friends, and as many people as they can. But I do not have a single person to call 'family' in the normal sense of the word. Even Grandmother Mut is no longer with us. So my will is for you and you alone, Wilhelm Schultz.

Let me confirm once again.

Am I really dead? Not stranded or missing in action, but truly dead, corpse and all?
If not, as I wrote earlier, this letter ends here.

This is the second page.
So I am dead after all.

This feels very strange. Right now I am alive to write this will (obviously, I could not write it if I were dead), but by the time you read this, I will no longer be in this world. This feels very strange.

Incidentally, how did I die?

Was it an aeroplane accident after all? Or did war break out without warning? I pray with all my heart that I did not go out like a fool by slipping on a banana peel and hitting my head.

Although I suppose that doesn't matter anymore, now that I am gone.

Let me continue.

Wil. I loved you.

Not as family or a friend who was with you for years. I, the woman named Allison Whittington, loved you, the man named Wilhelm Schultz. For a very long time. I do not know when I first fell in love with you. But I have loved you for a very long time.

When we turned 12, you entered secondary school to study, and I entered Roxche's Air Force Academy to fulfill my dreams of flying. So we could no longer be together like before.

Maybe that was why my feelings only grew stronger. I love you so much, Wil.

I want to be with you forever. I want to see things with you, visit places with you, sleep with you, wake up with you (I'm sorry, but please wake me up), spend time with you, grow up with you, and grow old with you.

I suppose I should write in the past tense, now.

I wanted to be with you. I wanted to see things with you, visit places with you, sleep with you, wake up with you (I'm sorry, but I wanted you to wake me up), spend time with you, grow up with you, and grow old with you.

Something just occurred to me. 'Was I able to confess my feelings to Wil, who reads this letter, while I was still alive?'

If I told you that I loved you, told you many times how much I loved you, and you thought I was an annoyance—and if you began to treat me differently because of that...

That thought scares me more than death.

But if you told me that you loved me too, I would be so happy. —Would have been.

As I write, I am trying to picture you reading this letter.

When this letter reaches you, what kind of person will you be? The Wil I know now? The Wil I'd wanted to know for a very long time? Or...

I do not know for certain, but I am sure that, no matter who you are now, I am very very upset that I can no longer be by your side.

I have decided. Next time we meet, I will tell you that I love you. That I love you very much. With confidence. I might be scared to say it, but I will confess my feelings. I have written them down here—there is no reason I cannot say it in person. I am the pilot who landed an aeroplane alone on her first try.

I do not know when it will be, but I pray with all my heart that I have already confessed my feelings to you, Wil, by the time you read this letter.

I think I will be visiting the area soon for a transport mission. I hatched a plan to find out when your summer break starts and arrive at your school with my unit, making a landing on the grounds. Without warning. I am planning an adventure that will change our relationship forever in that short period of time. Tell me, did it work?

Wil. Wilhelm Schultz.

I have so much to convey to you. So much gratitude. I am embarrassed to say it in person (although I suppose that is impossible by now anyway) so I will write it all down now.

Thank you for staying with me, even though I rudely called you my underling from the moment we met.

Now that I think about it, a part of me was afraid of losing my father and leaving my familiar home to live in an orphanage. Even though I had made up my mind to be strong.

I decided to be strong. I decided not to cry. That was what I told myself as I went up in front of the others, but I was actually very scared. I was so happy that you were my underling—no, trusty subordinate. —Actually, no. I am sorry. I apologize. Wil, you are infinitely more precious to me than any trusty subordinate could ever hope to be.

When I lived in the Capital District, other children used to tease me because of my unusual hair and eye color (although I made sure to pay them back with flying kicks). But when we first met, you said this to me, Wil:

“Allison. Your hair is so pretty because it sparkles in the sunlight.”

“Allison. Your eyes are so pretty because they look like they’re reflecting the sky.”

I was too shocked to give you a proper reply then, Wil, but in truth I was very, truly happy. I will remember those words to my dying day. (Will have remembered.) Thank you.

You were always so kind, Wil. You always joined in on my schemes, got in trouble with me if we got caught, and was punished with me as well.

I still treasure the four years we spent at the Future House, having all sorts of adventures (getting into trouble?) together. Thank you.

When Grandmother Mut passed away, I was despondent that I could not make it in time to say goodbye to her. But you sat silently by my side and let me cry into your shoulder. I was very sad, but thanks to you I did not end up sobbing in front of many people. That would have been unsightly.

It had been a long time since we last saw each other, but I was so happy to see that you had not changed a bit. Thank you.

It is nighttime now.

There are no flights tomorrow. So I am sitting alone in the mess to write this will. Whenever I write to you, the other members from my unit rush over and make a fuss, asking me

to show them. But no one is rushing to me now. The friend (female) who dropped by to get hot water for her thermos also just left with a wave.

It is a very quiet night.

Do you remember how you once asked me why my letters sound so formal? I am writing formally to you now all alone, still not remembering the answer. I wish I had your memory, Wil. I hope I remember before I die.

How did I die...?

Although I am alive right now.

I suppose there is no use wondering about it now.

Wil, I have one final request.

After I die—in other words, after you read this letter—

For one year, until this season returns, think of me from time to time.

When you see something beautiful or when you are moved by something, please—if only for a second—remember how I wished I could be with you for those moments. Please turn to look for me.

And once a year has passed...move forward. Enjoy your life.

Find a wonderful person to treasure and love with all your heart.

And live happily ever after with the person you love.

If, like Grandmother once said, death is just a deep, deep sleep, please forgive me for going to sleep first by myself.

I do not need to wake up.

You do not need to wake me up.

Thank you. Goodbye, Wil.

Allison Whittington

P.S. I have just cut off a piece of myself and am enclosing it in this letter. Whenever the urge strikes you, please look at it as you hold it up against the blue sky.

May your feelings be the same as mine. May they be eternal. Forever and always.

Allison

“What...is this...?” whispered a brown-haired girl, her hands trembling as she finished the letter before her. She was in her mid-teens, and was standing at the door to a bedroom finished with brick and wood.

The room was filled with morning sunlight. And sprawled out on the bed surrounded by simple furniture was a woman in blue pajamas. Her long blond hair concealed her head, which jutted off the mattress. There was a thin, wrinkled blanket over her, and she was completely still. Almost like an abandoned corpse.

“...So what was it, Lillia? A report...? ...What does it say?” the corpse asked sleepily.

“Huh? ...Erm.”

The girl named Lillia held back her trembling and folded the letter back along the clear creases. Then she pushed it into an envelope on the cabinet, so old that the ink on it had smudged into a blur.

But the letter would not fit. There must have been something at the bottom of the envelope. In the end, the letter stuck out several centimeters from the opening.

Lillia placed that envelope into a newer, larger envelope. The words on it were clear. Ms. Allison Schultz—the occupant of the bed—and her address and apartment number. There was also a large red box stamped on the side: ‘Returned due to overdue storage: Air Force Command Center’.

“Well...it’s from the military, so I thought maybe I shouldn’t look after all. I mean, what if it’s a military secret? I opened it, but I didn’t read it.” Lillia lied cautiously. The owner of the bed remained lying on her stomach, still half-asleep.

“...Okay?”

“I’ll just put it in the cabinet here. It wasn’t an express delivery, so I don’t think it’s an emergency. Read it whenever you feel like.”

“Okay. I’m gonna sleep some more. Leave me some food...”

“All right. Sweet dreams.”

Lillia placed the envelope in the cabinet and stepped into the hall, quietly shutting the door.

Left alone in the room, Allison lay on her bed and murmured in her sleep.

“Grandma...Wil...let’s play... We just got an awesome new aeroplane...let’s fly together...”



『遺書』

おわり

Meg and Lillia

"I'm sorry, Miss Megmica. You might be late for your first day of school," the driver said apologetically.

"It's all right. It's not your fault," I replied from the back seat.

The capital of Roxche, the Special Capital District, was crowded with apartment buildings and paved with wide eight-lane roads packed with cars.

The car I was in was also part of the traffic jam, surrounded on all sides by unmoving vehicles. Morning traffic was usually hectic, but it was very rare that things got this awful. Even the bus lane didn't move. There must have been an accident further down the street.

The aboveground metro train sped along the rails in the middle of the street, glinting in the sun as it passed the unmoving vehicles. People in cars and buses leered as they followed it with their eyes.

My name is Meg.

My full name is Strauski Megmica. Strauski is my family name, and Megmica is my given name.

In Roxche, the given name comes first. But I am from Sou Be-II, the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa.

Twenty years ago, it would have been unthinkable for someone like me to be stuck in traffic in an enemy nation like this. That's because Sou Be-II in the west and Roxche in the east—the two nations on either side of the world's only continent—were at war for all of history.

But things changed completely a little while before I was born. The nations lost their reason for war.

And now, there is an unbelievable amount of exchange happening between the two nations. Many people are now working cross-river. My father used to be one such person. Because he works for a foodstuffs company, when I was a little girl he was assigned the job of importing high-quality flour from Roxche.

He lived alone in the Capital District for a long time, until two years ago—when I was 14 years old—he decided to bring over the entire family.

At the time, I had been in my second year of middle school. Even though I would be with my family, it was painful to leave the friends I'd known since elementary school, my beloved hometown, and the nation I was born and raised in. There is no special school in Roxche for people from Sou Be-II. Although I didn't speak a word of Roxchean, I would have to attend a Roxchean school. Apprehensively, I boarded a ferry that crossed the North Sea alongside my mother and my two younger brothers.

I gazed at the massive mouth of the Lutoni River and tossed the bouquet I had prepared into the water. I thought of the thousands of soldiers from either side who died there and told myself that it was a wonderful thing for me to be able to go to Roxche like this.

When we arrived at the Capital District, we moved into a lovely apartment building provided by my father's company.

Life in Roxche wasn't difficult. I had my family, and my father's coworkers were eager to help. The climate was similar to our hometown, and the restaurant food seemed to taste even better.

I decided to not attend school for a while. That was because my Roxchean wasn't good enough for me to keep up with classes. So we hired a tutor and I practiced as much as I possibly could.

Unlike Bezelese, which has been used for ages in the Bezel area and has a rich history, Roxchean is an artificial language that was developed 200 years ago at the founding of Roxche. So it is very simple and functional. Unlike Bezelese, Roxchean has no grammatical gender or irregular conjugations and pronunciations. There are fewer characters in its script, and no special characters, either. So to my surprise, I picked it up quite quickly. I'm sure it would be very difficult to do the opposite—for someone born in Roxche to learn Bezelese.

In half a year, I could read, write, and converse to some degree. I began to attend secondary school in the Capital District.

A secondary school is a combination of Sou Be-II's middle and high schools. It is attended by students between the ages of 12 and 18, who generally want to move on to university. In Sou Be-II, after middle school you could go to a vocational school, or go to a high school to take more varied classes and move up to university or find a job. There are many options. But in Roxche, if you do not go to secondary school when you are 12 years old, you cannot advance further in academics. Then you would have to spend four years or so in vocational school before finding work. It may just be a matter of policy, but I think it is too harsh for your future to be decided when you are only 12 years old.

Secondary school was full of surprises.

Because I started school almost a year late due to how terms are scheduled, I had to start as a second-year student and redo my studies from my second year of middle school. I was a year older than my classmates, but no one in Roxche bats an eye at someone staying back a year. In Sou Be-II, you cannot repeat a year in middle school, and though it is possible in high school it is supposed to be very embarrassing.

There is also very little deference toward senior-classmen in Roxche. In middle school and high school in Sou Be-II, senior-classmen who are only a year older boss around the younger students. Maybe things are different because there is no aristocracy in Roxche now.

In Sou Be-II, each class of students gets one classroom, where most of the classes take place. We gather in that classroom in the morning and leave our things there. And we say good morning and good evening to our homeroom teacher there. But in Roxche, there is no homeroom class that we have to go to every morning. We leave our things in one of hundreds of lockers lining the walls, and when it is time for class we take our textbooks and head to the classroom. It means I have different classmates for every course.

Other than a few required courses, you can choose to take any subjects you want. You choose the classes you want from the curriculum to build your own timetable. Sometimes, you can take the same course as people in different years. Excellent students can take as many classes as they like, and if their grades are good enough they can move up a year or more. It is just like the university system in Sou Be-II. It felt like I started university a few years early, although I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing.

There are ordinary classes like Roxchean, social studies, mathematics, physics, chemistry, and music. But there are less ordinary classes with fewer students, like foreign languages (such as Bezelese), cooking, photography, horseback riding, driving, yachting, marksmanship, archery, and swordsmanship.

In Sou Be-II, you are expected to bring a lunch from home. But at the secondary school in Roxche, everyone eats lunch at the student cafeteria. The cafeteria is next to the central garden, and when the weather is nice, you can go out and enjoy lunch in the sun. There are no set menus—you just take the food you like, put it on your plate, and pay for what you get. Because the government pays for half the food, lunches are very affordable. And they are so tasty that I might gain weight if I really let myself go.

In Sou Be-II, I attended an all-girls school. So it was unnerving at first to attend classes with boys as well. We had to take physical education classes together, and we even had mixed swimming classes in the big school pool. Although I guess that doesn't have anything to do with Roxche itself.

The other students and I were all very conscious of the fact that I came from Sou Be-II. I was reserved because I could not adjust to the laid-back atmosphere of the school. And the other students treated me very carefully because I was a foreigner—almost like I was a fragile doll. Our generation is not very conscious of the war in the past, but they still looked at me differently. And not because of my looks—after all, many people in Roxche have black hair and fair skin like me.

For half a year, I didn't make any close friends, and ended up mostly hanging out with two people who were studying on a national scholarship from Sou Be-II. It was great to be able to speak in my mother tongue, but because they were both two years older than me, they felt more like senior-classmen than friends. I could not open up to them completely. The two of them had similar problems making friends, like I did, so the three of us ended up sticking together.

And at the end of the term, they both returned to our homeland.

I don't know how many times I wished I could go back, too. But my father's work was going so well, and my laid-back mother was enjoying life in Roxche—to say nothing of my brothers, who were celebrities in their classes at primary school and loved living in Roxche. Sometimes they even brought their friends over.

I knew I couldn't sit back and wait. So I decided to join a club.

I chose the chorus club because it could help me practice my Roxchean, but more because I love singing. I sang in the church choir ever since I was four years old back in Sou Be-II.

Joining the chorus club turned out to be the right choice. Meeting the same people every day in the clubroom helped me befriend them. Of the other club members, the president—who was in her final year at the school—was the nicest. She reminded me of one of the aunties in my hometown, with her plump build and warm disposition. She was the first real friend I made in Roxche. So for a few months before she graduated, I had a wonderful time at school.

I sent her off with tears at the end of the year, and a new term began.

I was used to the school by then because I'd been going for a year, but I didn't make any friends who would go to classes with me or sit next to me at the cafeteria. Everyone in Sou Be-II used to just call me 'Meg', but here it was always 'Miss Strauski Megmica from Sou Be-II'.

I told myself that that wasn't necessarily a bad thing, and began to blankly go to classes by myself and eat lunch alone, just looking forward to chorus club after classes.

That was when I met her.

A little while after the term began, we were given a choice between taking art or music class. I was always singing after classes anyway, and I wasn't very good at playing instruments, so I decided to take art class.

On the first day of the class, about 40 or so students gathered in the large art room. About half were boys and half were girls. As people sat together, chatting with their friends, I sat alone in a corner like I usually did.

The teacher came in and gave us a brief overview of the class. Then, for our first class, we had to pair up and draw pictures of our partners.

I hadn't expected such a trying lesson right off the bat. Because I didn't have any friends, I was usually one of the last people left. Although I was used to it, it was sad to raise my hand whenever the teacher asked if anyone was still not in a group.

But this time, it was even worse.

"Megmica here moved to Roxche from Sou Be-II. Would anyone like to volunteer to be her partner?" the teacher said out of the blue. I was taken by surprise. People were already avoiding me (or maybe were afraid of me?) because I was from Sou Be-II.

I even began to resent the teacher for telling everyone. But then—

"I'll be your partner."

It was a girl's voice. But I was probably the only one in the class who understood her. That's because she was speaking fluent Bezelese.

As I watched in shock, a girl with beautiful brown hair came up to me. She looked lively and confident—in a word, 'strong'.

"My name's Lillia Schultz. And you are?" Lillia asked in Bezelese. I introduced myself to her, and she smiled and sat across from me.

Everyone paired up and began to draw portraits of their partners. The art room was quickly filled with chatter.

I chatted with Lillia, too. First, I asked her how she spoke Bezelese so well. I even wondered if she was from Sou Be-II, as the family name 'Schultz' was not unheard of back home.

Lillia explained that she was born and raised in Roxche, but that she grew up speaking it at home because her mother was fluent in Bezelese.

Still, her Bezelese was excellent. One characteristic of the Bezelese language is that everyone outside Sfrestus, the capital, speaks a dialect (including me). But Lillia didn't. She spoke true Bezelese, the kind used by aristocrats and royalty.

The other students looked at us in awe because we spoke in a foreign language, but Lillia paid them no attention and talked with me. I did the same.

Lillia asked about me, and I explained that I moved to Roxche two years earlier because of my father's work. Lillia seemed really jealous. She said that she wanted to visit Sou Be-II someday, and even live there.

"I especially want to visit the village I was named after."

I asked her what she meant, and Lillia explained. That her name had come from a village in Iltoa where her parents pledged their future together.

"My real name is actually really long. Lillianne Aikashia Corazòn Whittington Schultz. Oh, you don't need to memorize it."

I was surprised, for two reasons. My hand froze.

First, the name 'Lillianne'. I assumed 'Lillia' was a Roxchean name, but that wasn't the case.

Queen Lillianne is the most famous ruler in the history of Iltoa. She was a beloved queen who united the Iltoa region in the Middle Ages. The village of Lillianne at the foot of the Central Mountain Range was named in her honor.

Very few people in Sou Be-II name their daughters 'Lillianne'. Queen Lillianne is such a famous figure that it's difficult to live up to her legacy. Lillia seemed to know that as well.

"Well, yeah. I heard about that from my mom. But this is Roxche," she chuckled, not troubled in the least. The name 'Lillianne' was a perfect fit for her.

The other reason I was surprised was her middle names. Adding in the grandparents' and the mother's family names as middle names is a very old custom in Sou Be-II, where blood ties are considered very important. No one follows it anymore, though, and in my case my legal name is simply Strauski Megmica.

"Huh... I think my mom named me that way so I wouldn't forget my roots. But it's a such a pain because there's never enough space to write my name in official documents. So I almost never use it."

The family names Aikashia and Corazòn are both in Sou Be-II, too. When I pointed that out, Lillia told me about her mother. Her mother was a war orphan, she said, who grew up in an orphanage called the Future House. I didn't know about it, but apparently the orphanage was founded by a woman who defected from Sou Be-II many years ago. Lillia's mother had looked up to the woman as a grandmother. That was why Lillia's middle names came from Bezelese family names.

"I have a lot of ties to Sou Be-II. Even though I've never been there." She grinned sheepishly.

Lillia then asked me if I could speak Roxchean, so we switched to it. I still had a bit of difficulty, but I could get by in ordinary conversations. My listening was better than my speaking, so I could understand most things unless it was spoken very quickly.

Lillia stopped drawing and smiled.

"You're really good! I thought you'd just come to Roxche this year."

I told her that I had moved the previous year. And that I didn't know anyone outside the chorus club, and that I didn't have a single friend in my year.

Lillia's hand froze.

And,

"Hm...so I guess that makes me your first Roxchean friend. It's an honor. Can I call you 'Meg'?"

"Ohh... I'm sorry, Meg. I'm no good at drawing," Lillia said apologetically as she showed me her picture at the end of class.

I told her it was all right—that, in fact, it was wonderful. That I loved it. Lillia's drawing did need some work. But in the picture, I was smiling.

It has been six months since that day. Lillia is my best friend. We don't take any classes together other than art, but we always sit together at lunch.

"Hm? ...Huh?"

I was floored. Lillia was outside my window. She was in a motorcycle sidecar behind my car, wearing a light jacket over her uniform and just as stuck in traffic as I was. She was wearing goggles, but I recognized her.

I repeatedly turned the crank to open the window.

"Lillia!" I cried, waving my hand. The boy on the motorcycle, who wore a leather jacket, heard my voice and told Lillia.

"Meg!" Lillia replied, getting to her feet in the sidecar. She took off her goggles and handed them to the boy, grabbed her bag, and got out of the sidecar.

Leaving the boy on the motorcycle in the gridlocked road, she wove between vehicles and crossed the center of the street to get to my car.

"Hey there, Meg! Hello, Mr. Driver! Can I get a ride, please?"

I nodded.

There was a good reason Lillia wanted a ride.

Students like me, who went to school by car, could do nothing about being stuck in traffic. If the driver testified at the school gates that we were stuck in a traffic jam, we were not marked as tardy.

Lillia usually went to school by bus and metro train. She would usually be on the train on this section of the road. I didn't know why, but this time she was on a motorcycle—and at this rate, she would be marked as tardy. But if she was with me, she could also be excused with the traffic jam.

"Man, that was close! Thank you, Meg! You're my hero!"

"You're welcome. Who was that boy on the motorcycle just now?"

"No one important. He's just my servant."

"A servant? What do you mean?"

"Just some guy who came to our house two days ago to sightsee around the Capital District. He happens to have a motorcycle so I asked him to give me rides to and from school starting yesterday, but *this* happened. I would've been marked late for sure if you weren't here."

"Now you won't break your no-late record, right?"

"It's so nice to have friends."

"..."

"What's wrong, Meg?"

"Yeah. It sure is."

The car didn't budge. Even with the fan on, it was hot under the summer sun.

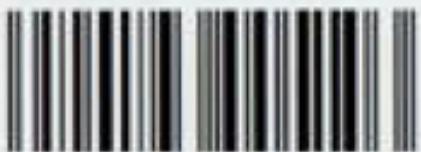
But I am very happy today.

And once more, I start a day of school in Roxche.

-Meg and Lillia: End-



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